

# Aide-de-Camp's Library



सत्यमेव जयते

Rashtrapati Bhavan  
New Delhi

Accn. No.

9. 1

Call No.

VI 1 C 1-53





# SELECTED STORIES



*By the same author*

NIGHTSEED

GAY AGONY

APPLES BY NIGHT

CRACK OF WHIPS

FIERCE AND GENTLE

SUNDAY BUGLES

LUNATIC BROTH

# SELECTED STORIES

by

H. A. MANHOOD

*From collections published  
between 1928-1944*



JONATHAN CAPE  
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE  
LONDON

FIRST PUBLISHED 1947

'PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN IN THE CITY OF OXFORD  
AT THE ALDEN PRESS  
BOUND BY A. W. BAIN & CO. LTD., LONDON

# CONTENTS

HIGH NOTES	7
SWIM, MY BEAUTY!	14
CHASING SHADOWS	20
UP THE MIDDLE	30
RACE ME, LOVE!	36
THE PORT-WINE PIRATES	41
LITTLE PARLIAMENT	51
DIGNITY, BE DAMNED!	57
LIFE, BE STILL!	73
FRAMEWORK FOR A MIRACLE	82
TWO HUNDRED BICYCLES	91
BIRD IN BOTTLE	98
EARLY MORNING TANTRUM	104
A FISH FOR INNOCENCE	109
THE PEACH TREE	120
TWENTY-ONE TO-DAY	136
THE BLACK ANGEL	142
CRACK OF WHIPS	148
EGG IN ROAD	162
THE UNBELIEVER	170
ALICE, WHERE ART THOU?	183
SWEET AND LOVELY	191
WILD IRISH BOY	205
PARADISE LOST	211
GLORY BOY	219
KILL OR CURE	224
SUCCOUR FOR BARNABAS	232
CHRISTMAS FROLIC	240
BATTLE OF SMITH	246
APPLE WOMEN	252
THE STUFFED COW	257
A SIMPLE TALE	263

## CONTENTS

SALESMANSHIP	272
THE WOODEN UNCLE	276
DEMOCRACY ON WHEELS	286
BAD LUCK FROM BRAZIL	291
LORD FLICK	298
LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR	304
FOXY'S TROT	310
DEAD DOG	319
JUGGERNAUT	324
LUNATIC BROTH	331
POOR MAN'S MEAT	337
FINE CIDER	346

## HIGH NOTES

You ask me what happen to Dulce Clavia, why does she sing no more, *me*! By God! you make me spit! Maybe you think I poke her off the top line, cook her goose, eh? Maybe you think she was not a goose but a lovely, lovely swan, singing to the stars? Well, she was a goose. I know. A *foie gras* goose, too, always stuffing herself. But wet fruit to you and to hell also. I will not tell you. You shall not give me the horse laugh.

You don't give a damn! Very well, then I *will* tell you, let you see what I suffer for that woman, years and years and many more years. Temperamental! You think a world-beater soprano should be temperamental! My friend, you know nothing. Clavia *learn* temperament in the very best places. I tell you she *sweat* temperament! I am a patient man. I do not think murder often, but Clavia, she give me ideas; she give me spots before the eyes also, thin my hair and leave me no digestion.

I tell you, before God, Clavia would not eat an egg unless she see the bird that lay it and she would not sing unless she eat an egg for breakfast. Always I have to telegraph hotels to have a hen ready, one hen ready for another hen. Very difficult! She would not sleep in a room looking north and curtains must be blue like a summer sky where her soul float; rainwater she must have to bathe in, silver to eat off and goat's milk to drink. Still, I do not mind all that, or the way she pile the money and let me scrape along. Tips I must give out of my own percentage, me, her manager! And always she whistle for me as if I have no name, 'whistle all day as if I was a pongo on the loose!

But that is nothing also. Art must be nursed. All

## HIGH NOTES

my life I nurse art, but never before do I nurse a slot machine, a singing bank, a harder than the nails and no discount. I grind my teeth loose for her, get the flutters and cold feet with the waiting. I live in hotels, in trains, boats, foyers, always in draughts. No place of my own, no wife, no comfort. I lose laundry all over the world. I live for Clavia, to smooth life for her, make her money. She is an artist and cannot be bothered. I am paid my percentage. I do not expect thanks. I *make* Clavia and I am proud.

I find her, I tell you, just a shopgirl with a voice. But such a voice! A range of three octaves and a half, top note D down to the G below the middle C. Think of it, the finest range in musical history, five notes higher than Melba and all as brilliant, pure as silver. And I find her. I direct her training. I give her to the world, make her great and perfect. And she only sniff at my pains, whistle when she want me to water her flowers or her dog or peel an orange.

You want to hear more? Well, I tell you. Clavia, she have the voice, beauty, brains, money, everything, but she stay hard like a red cheese. No ripeness anywhere. She get so she want more money, not to spend, but just to have. She get so she want to make a million and be respected by all those dutch ones who do not respect her voice. She work hard and smart at it, me too, engagements all over the world, top prices, recitals, opera, gramophone recordings; she sing anything if the price is right. Like gardening; she sing and every note is a seed, none wasted, and always the clapping like rain to water them and a bunch of banknotes to be picked. You laugh! I pile it on, you think? I have not suffered so much. I can still think poetry, see fun. Maybe I laugh at you not to know that poetry is what is left after hard chewing.

## HIGH NOTES

Well, one day we are in New York in a slack season. Clavia, she bully me to find her work, engagements, anywhere. Life was short. Maybe she lose her precious voice before she make the million, and all my fault. I hunt like a good dog, but things are very flat. I think maybe the wise heads hear the dollars hop behind those top notes. I think maybe we are finished. My ear ache with the telephoning; my feet cry like old rats. Then I get an offer and I think God remember me after all. Will Clavia go sing at Pawhuska, in Osage County, fee and all expenses guaranteed by our New York agent. Would she! I wish to know more about Pawhuska, but Clavia, she worry not a bit. They pay, she sing. Simple. We go.

Is your history good? Maybe you know Pawhuska? No? Well, I tell you. Pawhuska is the capital of Osage County, north-west Oklahoma. Just a big lump of desert that the Government give to the Osage Indians as camping ground. Everyone think it no damn good. Those Indians have six hundred acres each and they sure it no damn good. Then one day they find oil there and all those poor Indians are very rich and Government very sorry.

I guess those Pawhuska stores sell something of anything to all those rich Indians, silver-plated limousines, pianos, carpet sweepers, electric razors, silk stockings, marble bathrooms, even I think a lighthouse could be sold there. Those Indians get very tired thinking how to spend so much money; lease rents and royalties keep them double flush. They hear Clavia on a gramophone and they think they might as well buy some singing as anything else. And Clavia have no objections after she find they have plenty of the usual sort of money. She will not sing for beads or blankets, but money every time. Indians or whites, plums or onions, why care?



## HIGH NOTES

Besides these were very educated Indians anyway she think to want her singing. She could tell they were educated by the way the Big Chief look at her, as if she was a rising sun. I think they were nice people too, but not musical.

She sing for them in the hotel lounge. It was like a booking office to hell, but no one mind at all. Clavia sing high numbers by request and those Osages are very happy. They grin and nod at each other and ask for more. But Clavia shake her head very firmly. Her contract demand so many songs only. Money, was it more money she would like, Big Chief Black Whistle ask? It was. O.K. He dig a bankroll from his buckskin pants and give her the lot, grinning all over.

'Yell high, please.'

I get the idea quick. They certainly were not what you call music lovers, but Clavia is straight whisky to them; her top notes are like the old tribal war cries they are all too nice and educated to yell themselves. Clavia give them the best they ever hear. I guess she like singing with a bankroll in her hand; best value for ready money, it was what she learn as a shopgirl. And when she finish and bow and go and all the glasses and pictures stand still again those Osages go round and round shaking hands and rubbing noses and laughing at the good time they have. They come to me for more, much more, and they bring a present for me, ten thousand cigars in a cabinet big as a wardrobe. Please will the Singing Lily sing some more every night, plenty money.

I say I must see. I think of art, of the greatness of that voice. I tell Clavia they wish more, plenty more, and I tell her why they like her singing so very much. Business first, as usual. She just laugh, say to double the fee and how about arranging a straight recording of all war and tribal cries, something new, sure to sell.

## HIGH NOTES

I give up. I bury my simple little ideas about art and the strict purity of genius. I smoke cigars to keep the flies off. I drink mescal, too, but feel no happier. Pawhuska is a pig's town. The heat and the dust and the flatness and the dollar-snatching and the frame shacks and the stone houses like forts give me pain. But Clavia, the artist, is happy. There are hens, goats, rain-water and blue curtains, and she educate an Indian girl to hairdress for her in new styles.

At night she sing again, night after night, high notes and everybody happy except maybe me. I am glad there are no critics to write the story for the singing is not good. Clavia is happy and anxious to please. She sing high until I think my head will split like an old orange. But this Big Chief Black Whistle, he think maybe she still have an ace in her sleeve and one night he offer a thousand dollars for a single top note long and high as she can make it.

Clavia reach for his money quick, but a strange Cherokee in a corner call two thousand dollars. Clavia stop and wait for Black Whistle. He badly want it to be *his* top note for the glory of his tribe for ever and ever and he double the stake. The Cherokee double again, pronto, and Black Whistle shake his neighbours for their rolls. Ten thousand dollars. But the Cherokee have twenty thousand in his pants and he call that high. Black Whistle call for postponement until the bank open in the morning. But Clavia promise another top note in the morning for half price. I collect the twenty thousand and she sing her note.

The Cherokee look very black and sick, very quick. I have to explain. Then he tell me plenty. He think he buy a woman with his money, not a top note. He plenty rich but like more solid value for his money than the Osages.

## HIGH NOTES

Ha, you laugh! I laugh, too, but not then, my friend. It was a hot spot. The Cherokee would call nothing off and went for his tribe, the Osages were very mad and sad, and I went for the Sheriff, for some law and order. But that Sheriff was not nice. In fact, he stink! He have interests, business investments, all through the town and he see enough of Clavia and the Osages to guess she leave them only tobacco money. He see bankruptcy for the luxury trades and he go very thoughtful and tell me that according to Cherokee law the Indian *had* bought Clavia and to save riot and bloody massacre he was going to marry her officially to the Indian and send them back to his reserve. You may not do that, I say pretty quick, but he just spit in my eye, load his gun and go telephoning the town to bring Clavia and their shotguns along.

They come all right with Clavia and the Cherokee and the judge marry them about as slick as you roll a pill, charging double; they charged those Indians double for everything. The Osages were stamping and bawling to see their war cry taken away and all for a few thousand dollars. Clavia want to say plenty, but they hold her tight and no one listen. Then someone clap her on the back and give her hiccups and when she recover she is a squaw. Just like that!

Terrible! Why, certainly, it was terrible. If the press got hold of it Clavia was finished, washed out. Whenever more than a million people laugh at a soprano, she is finished. I was pretty sick, wondering how we undo her without spilling beans. Money, it had to be money. It cost most of her roll and an appeal to Congress to get her loose without a laugh. And, afterwards, when I think all beautiful and safe, she marry the lawyer who win her free. I think maybe she thought that was the only way she could get some of her money back.

## HIGH NOTES

He was a difficult one, that lawyer. His favourite song was 'I love you, California'. He love money too, but think music just a not necessary noise. His sight was short, his hearing also. One day in the lift with Clavia he hear a humming and he think the electricity is loose and dangerous. He get very nervous and press all the buttons and they go bump to the bottom, twenty-seven stories down. The hum was just Clavia practising. They were down there two days and nights. I never know what happen down there, but when they rescue them this lawyer is quite deaf and Clavia has lost her voice. Quite ruined. Such a terrible loss.

Clavia blame it all on to those Indians. She think plenty and get this husband to buy oil shares, corner the market. They bust many people and make a million and Clavia is very happy again. She tell the world she retire for love and tell me she hope her husband die soon.

On my birthday she send me a bow and arrow and a photograph of her husband. I think I send her some poison and a gramophone record of my new soprano. A beauty, not quite Clavia's range, but such lovely, generous warmth . . . it is like riding on sunlight. I get on in years. I cannot suffer one more disappointment. I think therefore I marry *this* one, rightaway, before she get temperament. Then we can have temperament together or maybe no temperament at all. Just think how happy we may be with no temperament at all!

## SWIM, MY BEAUTY!

LEMUEL PARGOE of Quaker Cove was the only man I've ever known who trained a dog to help him with his fishing. He was near sixty, tough and independent and clever, and caught more grey mullet every season than any other three-man team along the coast. With only his Labrador retriever, Suky, to help too, the dog swimming constantly round the indrawn net, preventing the fish from leaping to escape. Worth her weight in gold or better, Lemuel would swear affectionately.

Lemuel lived with his daughter Annie in a lonely, square, stone cottage that was like a hand-wrought nail holding the half-moon of the cove in place against the tides. Annie was young and very handsome, but hot-tempered, so that life was a constant battle for both. Not that Lemuel minded her tantrums so long as she kept the house going. He even enjoyed the fighting, since it reminded him of his dead wife, blazing back without malice until the day Annie became over-spiteful and flung a hammer at the unoffending Suky.

It was the crest of the mullet season, with the weather fair and the shoals following each other with rare regularity, nosing inshore to feed, breaking water so that it seemed as if thorns were seeking a place in which to grow. Suky was working to perfection, holding the mullet while Lemuel worked the net, and the profits were coming sweet and heavy.

Lemuel went cold and hard all over when he saw the hammer fly and hit Suky crackingly on the leg. Suky whined faintly and scrabbled painfully to her corner, lying still when Lemuel touched her. The leg was broken. Without a word or glance at the defiant Annie, Lemuel cut splints, setting and binding the

## SWIM, MY BEAUTY!

broken bones skilfully, placing Suky comfortably on her mat with word and look that would be sufficient to keep her still.

Already there were mullet in the cove. Lemuel had seen them when he went to cut the splints. No call for them to be lost. Swiftly he turned on Annie, very straight and fierce:

‘Get to the boat!’

‘Shan’t!’ Annie was frightened but still defiant.

Lemuel didn’t bother to argue. He unbuckled his belt, driving Annie before him out of the door, down the beach. She was tempted to run, but prudence stopped her, for if she ran now she’d never be able to come back. Better to bide her own time, leave him high and dry when she’d worked something out. Boat and net were waiting. Lemuel secured the net, shoving the boat off, driving Annie into it, jumping in himself, rowing quietly and rapidly in a half-circle, enclosing the feeding mullet.

Then he spoke to the flaming Annie:

‘You broke Suky. You’ve got to do her job. Over you go! Swim, my beauty!’

And over the side Annie had to go, swimming sulkily round the half-circle of net while Lemuel held and hauled on his patent, home-made tackle against the falling tide. When a dozen fine fish leaped the corkline to freedom Lemuel swore terribly, bawling a threat. Swearing too, but silently, Annie swam as he ordered, stalking ashore when the catch was safe, draggled and boiling, sleek and handsome as half of Spain, her mind made up. She’d had enough of such slavery. She’d find a husband. It would be easy enough with her looks and only right and proper to make someone work for her, for a change.

Lemuel watched her go up to the cottage, muttering

## SWIM, MY BEAUTY!

to himself, hurrying over the carrying of the fish, dumping them anyhow in the cool shelter of the big, upturned boat that served as shed, very anxious for Suky, wondering whether he should take her over the hill for advice from the quarry foreman. But she seemed comfortable enough, lying patiently still, worried that she could not work, pleased and reassured by Lemuel's manner and care. He fed her and talked to her, explaining that a week or two of quiet would put her right once more, that Annie must right the wrong by taking her place. And Suky understood and was content.

Lemuel meant every word of it, and Annie knew it too. Angrily she obeyed, planning an escape, turning over possible husbands in her mind, making careful choice, going at last one evening on her bicycle to a neighbouring cove. It was late when she returned, but the job was done. Young Sam Trevaskis, hard-working and unencumbered by relations, honest as daylight, hadn't been able to resist her softness and beauty, or the tale she told of long-standing, silent love for him. To help matters she had winced a bit from time to time, explaining the accident to Suky, that it wasn't her fault, and how Lemuel was treating her worse than any dog, belting her unmercifully. No man could have ignored such an appeal, and it was Sam himself who suggested marriage just as soon as he could get hold of one of them quick-working licences.

Still Annie said nothing to Lemuel until the morning Sam called for her in a smartly painted pony-cart. Then she said plenty, Sam adding something too, that he'd a good mind to paste Lemuel for his cruelty and to hell with him twice over. Annie looked very beautiful in close-fitting silk, and Sam would have died for her there and then.

## SWIM, MY BEAUTY!

Lemuel said nothing. Let bygones be bygones, and a good riddance anyway. Now there'd be peace and quiet. He was in a hurry himself that morning to be off after a young retriever pup to be training alongside Suky when she was fit again, and merely watched them go with half a smile on his lean, weathered face. As man to man he was sorry for Sam, but there it was. Good luck to 'em, although he didn't fancy the squalls ahead.

Left to himself, Lemuel managed well enough, although it was a bit lonely, he had to admit. Still, Suky was mending well and the new pup was shaping like a hero. His catches were thin but sufficient. Slowly all anger died. After all, Annie was his own flesh and blood. She had her good points. He wasn't getting any younger. Young Sam was a good, steady chap; make a useful partner, maybe, if Annie didn't work him to death. Perhaps a husband was all she'd been wanting to calm her down. Lemuel remembered his wife. She'd been a handful too, but worth it, and, remembering, he doubted whether Sam would be able to manage Annie.

For a long time he pondered. Suky walked and swam again and the pup swam too, bravely and knowingly, learning rapidly. The catches were full-sized once more. Prices, too, were exceptionally good, and Lemuel felt at last that he could afford a day's holiday. He'd go and have a look at Sam and Annie. Maybe he'd give 'em the pup as a present if they were pleased to see him.

He did not fix a special day or wear his stiff black Sunday best, but hopped aboard a fish carrier's van one morning, dropping off at the top of the hill above Sam's cove. Sam's cottage, like his own, was snug and well placed, and there was smoke rising from the chimney to show the wheels were still turning.



## SWIM, MY BEAUTY!

Lemuel stood for a moment, Suky and the pup close at heel, silent and observing, before dropping down the sheep path through the gorse and heather. There were mullet in the cove, a fine, spitting school of them. What the hell was Sam doing, wasting time and money that way? Then he saw the boat pull out and round, Sam and Annie in her, and he hurried, waiting on the beach for Sam to complete his circle, ready to help with the hauling. The net nearly laid, Sam snapped an order, reaching down into the boat, speeding the reluctant Annie with a strap, tipping her overside with a forceful rock of the boat.

'Swim, my beauty!'

And Annie swam grimly backwards and forwards round the net, keeping the fish tight inside. Lemuel grinned. Sam grounded the boat and Lemuel moved to help, Sam seeing him for the first time.

'Hello, Lem! Glad to see you!' Sam's voice was strong and very friendly: 'How's things? That swim business of yours is a good idea. Annie thought I was going to do the swimming, but I changed her mind.'

'Good for you. I was afraid you mightn't.'

'So was I,' Sam admitted cheerfully: 'But it's done her good to be mastered. Proper handful, ain't she? But I wouldn't swap.'

A word from Lemuel, and Suky and the pup plunged into the sea, swimming round the net while Sam and Lemuel hauled. Annie came scowlingly ashore, knowing they'd been talking about her, stalking off without a word.

'Hey!' Sam bawled: 'Come and say how-do to your pa. . . .'

Annie stood silently, the proud, handsome shape of her made more perfect by the streaming lick of water.

'Just like your ma,' Lemuel said: 'I brought a pup

## SWIM, MY BEAUTY!

across for you. 'Course, if you'd rather do the swimming yourself I'll take him back.'

Sam nearly choked with laughing: 'Thanks, Lem. We'll keep him all right. O.K., girl, all square if you want it that way. We'll be up to dinner just as soon as we get fixed.'

Surprisingly Annie did not cuss or fly, only turned away up the beach to do the cooking, smiling a bit to herself.

'Nice catch,' Lemuel said off-handedly, and Sam nodded happily, knowing what he meant.

## CHASING SHADOWS

NATTY BREWISS had worked the job out very thoroughly and it looked perfect all ways, the best yet and good enough to set him solid on top. Slowly it had ripened to one Saturday afternoon, with old Klawns, the jeweller, away on his annual outing to the sunny seaside with a bunch of his more respectable pals. More bluff than pleasure, you might say, for it was very necessary for old Klawns to have a respectable front, friends who could vouch for him as a simple, honest man if ever the police came looking that close for the biggest fence in the Tower Hamlets.

Natty had had the date indexed for weeks. The Saracen's Head crowd had even wanted him to join them on the trip, but, with a good show of reluctance, he'd refused. He was running a wrestling tournament up north; be away about a week.

That was a blind, too, for Natty had never been much of a promoter or even a first-class wrestler. After he'd broken a neck in the ring with a jaw-snapping trick that came natural to him, and served a sentence for manslaughter, they'd warned him off, arguing that he lost his temper too poisonously easy. It was probably that splash of Africa in his blood that did it. It was deep down and some way back, and you could only guess at it by the glove-like sallowness of his skin and the bruise-coloured moons of his finger nails. Anyway promoting had been the next best thing and Natty certainly looked the part, talking the big stuff better than the best, keeping top-sides of the game, always in the front row at a big show, full of gamey prophecies and always willing to back his fancy. When he was flush after a busy turn of pick-pocketing or when one

## CHASING SHADOWS

of his blackmailing eggs hatched out it was easy to explain that he'd put a packet on young so-and-so to win; fine lad that, a world-beater, given the right management.

Natty was tall, thinly muscular; stripped, he seemed a mere strapping of muscle over ungainly bone. Speed and ferocity had made a constant winner of him as a wrestler and the speed still showed in his nimble strut and twist of hand. He was very dressy, drank only brandy and smoked thin, cheap cigars for effect. He wore grey, curling felts and hot-coloured shirts, and his suits were always tight-fitting, wide-winged and knife-trousered, well-made by a little Jewish tailor who had stolen to send his ailing family into the sunshine of the new Jerusalem, and was now himself held firmly under the all-knowing Natty's thumb. Pearl tiepin, gold ring on his little finger and thin gold key-chain gave the final flourish to what Natty felt was a lordly turnout.

But he wasn't a bit his own smart self this Saturday afternoon when he left his lodging for Slater's Yard, back of the High Street. He wore a paint-streaked boiler suit, a pair of boots belonging to a fellow lodger — heavy and clumsy as brick moulds they seemed after his own dainty glacé leathers — and in his pocket was the key to the Timoxa Toy Factory in the yard, of which the fellow lodger was paint foreman. He, fortunately, had gone with the same party as old Klawns and in a best suit borrowed from Natty, so you see there were alibis all round if things went wrong.

But Natty didn't intend that they should go wrong; the prize was much too big. He looked near enough like the foreman to pass unnoticed at a distance. Forced by the boots into something of the foreman's gait he went down the gun-posted alley into Slater's

## CHASING SHADOWS

Yard, a mechanic's bag in hand and every sense on tiptoe. The yard was empty; not even a cat prowled among the corner dustbins.

Briskly Natty turned his key in the padlock, swung the factory door, stepped inside and shut the door behind him. Looking quickly back through a smudgy window corner he could see no one. There wasn't much chance that anyone would notice the padlock hanging loose for the few minutes he would be there and, even if they did, they'd simply guess that the foreman had been in such a hurry to get to the sea on this hot summer day that he'd overlooked the locking.

Hands gloved and not even a coin clinking in his pockets, Natty crossed the factory. It was a scruffy, beamy, untidy place. Large crates stood ready packed for export. Benches were stacked with half-made dolls and rubber animals. Rows of wooden ships hung to dry after spraying. Bales of coloured cloth stood like a rainbow before the mixing and, high upon the grimy wall, a clock stared like a pallid sun, silent, stifled perhaps by the turbid smell of glue, rubber, paint, putty and sawdust.

Natty knew the layout perfectly for he had called several times for the foreman to take him to some especially good battle. It was on one of these visits that he had noticed offhandedly a clumsily barred door half hidden behind machinery and ancient gear. Guessing shrewdly, he had plugged for information.

'Nice place to keep the wages if you ain't scared of rats.'

The foreman, mild and honest, grinned broadly: 'Back door into old Klawns's,' he explained. 'Decent old stick. He uses it sometimes to let a lady friend out this way. Always gives me a bob or two.'

Natty had laughed inside at that. Old Klawns was

## CHASING SHADOWS

going to pay dearly for his lady friend. Facing the door now he took out his bunch of wires and tickled the heavy lock. The door opened inwards, creakily, almost at once, breaking a cobweb or two. But Natty wasn't worrying about cobwebs. He wasn't even worrying what Klawns would say or do when he found the leak. If he was as wise as he looked he'd say and do nothing, but you never could tell. He'd have a gummy time explaining away a lot of things anyway if the bobs got word of it.

Natty crept easily between the rusted bars, thankful for his leanness, thinking Klawns's lady friend must be pretty slim too, unlike old Klawns himself who looked and weighed like something out of the knacker's yard. Wondering who she was and how much she knew, Natty went carefully along a dark passage, blind-footed in the clumsy boots. He came to Klawns's parlour. The door opened on the latch. Loaf of bread, garlic-nifty sausage and empty whisky bottle on the stained cloth. Old newspapers everywhere, evidence of how carefully Klawns followed the shut-eye trade. The pig-bellied bed hadn't been clean-folded for weeks. Cigarette ends thick in the hearth. Just a poor old bachelor who couldn't help getting in a mess!

Natty grinned evilly, peering cautiously into the shuttered shop. No cheese for him there, not even in the lanky pensioner's safe. But he knew where to look. A drunken bricklayer had told him of a queer job he'd done once down in Klawns's cellar, something about a furnace, and how one found the cellar.

An untidy scullery led off from the parlour. Bottles and stale food everywhere and, in a dingy cave of a cupboard, Natty found the entrance to the cellar. Newspapers covered the flap. Natty lifted it, stepping gently down in the pooling torch light.

## CHASING SHADOWS

The cellar smelt damp and sour, ratty, which wasn't surprising considering the rats who came visiting from time to time. A neat furnace, crucibles, diamond dust on the bench, interesting tools and, more interesting still, a real classy safe in a corner.

But Natty had real class too in his spidery fingers. A little hot-oiling, a delicate, thrusting control of balance and the door opened quiet as a fold of silk. Inside was a fortune in banknotes, just as Natty knew there would be, for good, untraceable notes were indispensable to most of Klawns's clients. Besides, only two nights back, Klawns had sold a basinful of gems to a Dutch pal of his. They'd nearly kissed each other good-bye. Natty had seen the Dutchman drive away in a taxi and he'd had a drink with the taxidriver afterwards:

'Must've been a traveller in phonies. He had a bagful of clinkers big as doll's eyes. I asked him for one for my old woman but he said to take her to the seaside for the day and let her pick up some for herself. Gave me a quid, he did. Just shows you what they make out of that flash stuff.'

Natty had felt like giving him a quid too. Quickly he stuffed his mechanic's bag, adding two chamois leather bags of sovereigns, a matchbox full of uncut diamonds and a real gold brick just for luck, solid evidence of God only knew how many burglaries. Jubilantly he shut the safe, nipping up the wooden steps, rearranging the newspapers over the flap.

Nothing moving in shop or parlour, only the worried ticking of a clock and the buzz of a bewildered fly. Back along the passage and into the toy factory. Still all clear. He shut the door tidily, moving obliquely across to the smudgy window. No one in sight. He opened the door, blinking in the flag-fall of sunlight. Ten more minutes and he'd be as safe as Moses.

## CHASING SHADOWS

Then he swore harshly, for a boy was leaning idly against the scabby wall only a yard or two away, swinging a weighted bit of string in the sunlight, amused by the hopping shadow. Slowly he looked up at Natty, thin face agape, hand still jerking the string. Natty moved quickly, desperately. A fortune in his hand and this kid could spill the lot with a word.

'Hello, son.' Natty's voice was viciously low. The boy stared in a dull, frightened way, backing a little, shaking the weighted string as if to ward Natty off. Natty wrenched the string from him. The boy screamed and Natty caught him swiftly by the neck, running him before him into the factory, jerking the door shut.

A near thing. Take no chances, Natty told himself. Hissing in sudden brutal anger he wrenched the boy backwards in an easy, familiar way, his powerful hands forcing his jaws hideously apart, straining his thin neck backwards over his knee. A jerk and the neck broke and Natty, with a final, black-tempered heave, smashed the jaws as one might rip an old handbag. A bloody gulping, a popping of red-jelly eyes and Natty propped the dead thing carefully upright to avoid a mess.

Slit-eyed and very cool now, he looked all ways. Then he jerked one of the labelled crates closer, prising it open, squashing a place among the boxed toys and wood straw, cramming the slack, ragged-clothed body inside, packing more toys neatly over and nailing all down securely. One more glance at the label: The Bonito Wholesale Company — Melbourne, and he felt safe again. By the time they found it it would be impossible to connect anywhere.

Once again he picked up his bag. This time the yard was quite empty. He snapped the padlock shut, clumping away out of the yard. A minute later he was



## CHASING SHADOWS

safe among the busy High Street shoppers, just a simple, carefree mechanic on his homeward way.

For a week Natty lived low and humbly in a wharf-side lodging, tremulous inside for all his stiff front, listening with nerves as well as ears for a hint of danger, trusting no one. But he heard nothing. As the days passed confidence bloomed again. He returned by a roundabout way to his old lodging, spruce and cheerful, bustling into the Saracen's Head like the successful man he was, greeting old friends. Old Klawns was there, sulky quiet, but unsuspicious and harmless enough. Had he enjoyed his day out at the seaside? 'Not half!' the crowd chorused. He'd eaten lobster after lobster and had indigestion yet, and Natty laughed with them, knowing the true cause and quality of that indigestion. The old cluck was afraid to talk; a good business man but no guts. He might even be suspecting the Dutchman of a return trick, biding his time for a word.

Natty slept well that night, the spoil snug in a belt round his middle. All except the gold brick and that was replacing an ordinary brick in the wall over his head, whitewashed like the rest. Very slowly he'd pass the stuff into a respectable banking account, flog the stones on a day trip to Boulogne, stick to the gold brick for luck and step into the promoting business with a toney club of his own. A sporting club was a good place to do all sorts of business from. He'd big ideas; he'd get others to work 'em out.

Meeting the foreman he invited him very amiably to a drink and a red plush entry down at Pellion's, but the foreman shook his big, blond head.

'Got to see a man about another job.'

'What, fired?'

'No, the factory's gone bust. Bankrupt sale to-

## CHASING SHADOWS

morrow, the whole blooming works. They owe me three weeks' dough, but I haven't much hopes.'

Natty left him in a hurry, suddenly sick inside. There was another question he was aching to ask, whether those crates had left for export before they screwed down. No good worrying though. Let 'em get on with it. They couldn't pin anything anywhere.

But, reliving the killing over and over again, Natty didn't really believe that. He cursed himself for his stupidity in using the jaw-break. Only one in ten thousand had the trick of it. Someone would be sure to remember that manslaughter job of his. Why, the mob had even named the hold after him. Fiercely he tried to reason himself out of an attack of nerves. Hell of a go if there was a slip-up now. If only he could get hold of that crate. He had to know, anyway, in case it looked wiser to make a bolt.

The crates were there all right, exactly as he'd left them that Saturday afternoon. He saw them through the window round about dusk and needed a row of brandies afterwards to steady his nerves. He thought of sending someone to the sale to bid, but there was no one he could trust, not even the paint foreman; it would look too damned fishy.

He drank a lot that evening. The sale was billed for eleven o'clock. Natty was there at a quarter to the hour, looking idly around, hardly his usual natty self, but confident enough. A lorry, bought hastily, waited in the High Street, and the sooner he was driving away with the crate safe behind the sooner he'd feel himself again.

The crates seemed not to have been moved even, only the dispatch labels had been wrenched off and lot numbers substituted. He looked closely as he dared, recognizing his own renailing. Lot No. 42 and he

## CHASING SHADOWS

hoped to God they didn't open it up to show the contents before selling. He'd been a fool to come. On the other hand, though, if he could only get hold of the crate he was safe for good. He half thought of making an offer right away, but that might look a bit too anxious. Impatiently he waited close to the door. After all, someone had to buy it and he could easily make a deal afterwards if he missed it in the bidding.

A cheesey looking lot, a bunch of Jews, clawing busily, a few small tradesmen and street hawkers, an old iron merchant or two and the usual idlers. A couple of birds who looked like bum-clerks hired to pump prices and the auctioneer himself, terrier-nosed and energetic. No sign of the foreman, fortunately.

'Come now, gentlemen. . . .'

The stuff went easily, but not cheaply. The Jews, disappointed, dropped out quickly when the bum-clerks began bidding for the crates. The crates sold, one by one, for far more than they were worth, according to the Jews. Natty felt like travelling long distances, but he stuck tight. He could take the crate away immediately after the sale, tidy it up in the country somewhere. Perhaps he should have made a bid for one or two of the earlier crates. Too late now, though.

'Lot No. 42. Contents as described. What shall we say?'

Ten shillings, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five. Natty said two pounds, hoping to shake the bum-clerks loose in one jolt. But they clung. Three pounds, three ten, four pounds. The Jews lifted hands and eyes to high heavens at such foolishness, but Natty kept going.

Their limit would be reached before his, anyway. Four ten, five pounds. The Jews were exclaiming riotously among themselves, wondering if they had

## CHASING SHADOWS

been misinformed about the contents. 'One gross sixpenny articles retail...it don't make sense!' Sarcastically the auctioneer begged for a little quiet. Five ten, six pounds.

What the hell was wrong with them? Natty, angered, spat out ten pounds, then knew at once that he'd made a terrible mistake for the heaviest of the bum-clerks had moved to Lot No. 42, shoving the crate aside, looking at Natty all the time. On the wooden floor where the crate had stood was a curdled, bloody stain.

Natty went to run, needling fast. But they had him back and front, a string of policemen waiting ready. And one detective nodded admiringly to the other:

'Another long shot! Now we shall find out *why*. How d'you do it, psychology again?'

'Read it in a book,' was the slow, biting retort. 'See what you miss by sticking to the racing news?'

Sadly and soberly he admonished the winded, broken Natty: 'A pity you had to touch that kid. He was half-witted anyway, nobody's sweetheart. The boys used to keep an eye on him. He was only fit to dangle a string, chase shadows. We found the string outside. He always kept it tied to his wrist. Must have taken a lot to part him from it, we thought.'

And, standing in the dusty sunlight, the detective dangled a familiar, weighted string grimly, the jerking shadow curiously lifelike for an instant before stillness.

## UP THE MIDDLE

LUKE FARECOST was well past sixty when he decided to have a look 'up the middle'. All his life he had plied the coast, topnorth, belt-line and lower west, buying old, misused boats and salvaging wrecks for his yard, always working his outward passage in sailing barge or coaster captained by an old friend and always patching up his purchase and sailing it home to Jezreel's Point on the Medway with calm, cheerful genius.

He knew every port and lewth from head to tail of this busy gimcrack-shaped island as surely as a boy knows the shape and breaks of an orchard boundary, and it was said of him that he could sail anything, upright or upside down, with only a handkerchief and a nail to help him, although Luke's only comment on a difficult passage would be: 'Had to get her home somewhen somehow.'

He was a fine jobbing shipwright too and every one of the cripples he brought home was rebuilt to last tight as a bottle for another fifty years or so, the only sign of pride of craft being a deep graven F on keelson or sternpost. But, somehow, it was easy to recognize a boat that Luke had worked over for it looked so happily, confidently right as if some of Luke's own calm strength had been built into it, grafted understandingly so that pride grew again and gale and cross-chop made a matter for laughter.

Luke's two sons were coming along too, although Luke's quality was, as it were, split between them, Matthew being a natural carpenter and James a natural sailorman. They were both over thirty and still, boyishly, asked Luke for the little money necessary for tobacco and rare courting gifts, Sabina, Luke's staid

## UP THE MIDDLE

and stolid wife, buying their clothes and Luke himself trimming their dark, muddly hair when it began to overhang and spoil their stroke.

Quietly and comfortably the family lived in a salty little world of their own. Apart from trips made round the edge by Luke and the boys after some bargain or other Jezreel's Yard held all their interest, Sabina tirelessly busy in the bright-painted, ship-timbered house above the strand, the endless sea traffic beyond the point a kind of literature to them all, a newsreel of the world, for every kind of ship and cargo passed and repassed and Luke, reading details with unwinking blue eye, summing them all, was astonishingly well informed.

But, somehow, it was like the knowledge of a man who sets out food for a dog he never sees, Luke decided for himself one day. The stuff came everlastingly by, but where the hell did it all go to? And it was then that he realized that in all these years he had never had a fair sight of anything beyond the edge, never been more than half a step inland. Always coastwise, and it was high time, for the good of his judgment, that he had a look farther, all of them for that matter, else they'd be getting in a rut and hardly wiser than the gulls that stood about the yard like old, salt-frosted lamps gasping for oil.

Luke had made plenty of money through the years but, until now, there had been nothing much to spend it on. Good food and clothes, a tight roof, a sup to drink and a plug of tobacco, what more did anyone want? But now, simply and easily, he made up his mind, asking Sabina quite casually for two hundred pounds from the fund in the iron box upstairs under the big, four-poster bed.

'A deal?' she queried, more from habit than curiosity,

## UP THE MIDDLE

and Luke nodded: 'Aye, a deal,' thinking she'd been a good wife and well deserving of a holiday. She brought the money, a mixed bundle of notes, asked if he'd be gone long and returned to her washtub, for she still preferred to whiten her own linen.

In a couple of hours Luke was back, driven in style in a big, ancient but sweet-running Rolls-Royce tourer by a grinning mechanic, who also was to teach him to drive. The car had once belonged to a duke — the crest was still there to see — and that was good enough for Luke. He had looked the engine over and listened to its tune and, expert in dealing, had bought the car for exactly half the price asked, producing his bundle of notes with awkward timeliness, laughing to himself at this unfailing effect of ready money, desirable as carrots to a starved horse. Maybe that was what was wrong with the whole troubled world, lack of ready money, lack of faith to pay; maybe that was why the Duke himself had had to sell his handsome car.

The deal closed, Luke was anxious for action. The mechanic was young and sprightly, apt to judge a gooseberry by its hairs, so to speak, and he foresaw a long and amusing job. But he did not know Luke. Jezreel's Yard was very large, intersected everywhere by roads between stacked timber and ancient sheds and gear, and in an hour Luke was at the wheel, driving expertly round and about, judging his distances to a hairsbreadth, reversing neatly, changing gear with a far more delicate sense of touch than the mechanic himself, perfect master of the car, the two boys looking on with mild curiosity, but Sabina keeping mistrustfully at a distance, hardly daring to think what the presence of the car might mean. Dismissing the mechanic with half-a-crown, a chew of tobacco for the good of his nerve, and a fatherly pat on the shoul-

## UP THE MIDDLE

der Luke asked if dinner was ready and also if they'd all be prepared to start 'up the middle' come Monday morning, which was the earliest he could obtain licences.

'What about the yard, Dad?' Matthew asked.

'We'll give it a rest for a month, Son. It's a choice time of year to be looking round, with harvest under way.'

So it was settled although Sabina accepted the news in gloomy silence. She was never one to gad about, hating change, content among the known and settled shape and time of home. But she had never yet crossed Luke in his purposes and she said nothing, although the thought of travel, of strange, possibly damp beds, queer food and never a right cup of tea ahead chilled her agonizingly.

By six o'clock on the Monday morning they were off, house and yard locked behind them and some tarpaulins, food and water stowed on the carrier, together with a lantern or two in case they were benighted and the electric failed to work.

Sabina was dressed in her best serge with a fur and muff for extra warmth, tight-lipped, hiding misery, Matthew and James, shaved and brushed to a high polish, sitting stiffly in the back, and Luke driving blithely and easily, dressed about as usual, with a fresh dab of paint on his peaked cap and his old black clay between his strong teeth. One or two neighbours saw them go, but only funerals came to their minds, not holiday, for whoever heard of the Farecosts taking holiday?

By noonday, surprisingly, they were back home, the whole family, and seemed pleased to be there. But they came not by car but by launch down river from Westminster and round the Point. Luke hadn't much to



## UP THE MIDDLE

say, nor the boys: 'Piled her up and can't be bothered with another just now', and they took off their jackets and went to work where they had left off.

Sabina, very pink and bright-eyed, saved from calamity, sat down gratefully upon a kitchen chair, blew her nose hard and was pleased to see that the fire was not quite dead and that the kettle was near to boiling. A cup of tea and she'd be all right. There was a long, bruised cut in the toe of her new, stout boots. Quite deliberately, after a glance through the window to see that Luke and the boys were busy, she took off the boots and rammed them into the fire, piling fuel atop and working the bellows hard. The boots had not been in the least uncomfortable, but she could not bear the sight of that long, ragged cut in the leather. She was reluctant to explain, but in the end the story came out:

'Luke, he thought it would be good and proper to go by Westminster way, but on the bridge he saw a stumpy coming down river and he stopped the motor quick and jumped out to shout a word. It was a fellow he knew and he wanted word of some boat aground up Yarmouth way.

'It was a right mess, stopping like that, with motors and things all round. Luke wasn't hurrying himself and there was a bit of a crowd and I saw two saucy wenches, all bedizened and near hopping out of their dresses, making up to Matt and James. And I began to think what this travelling might do to all of us. Luke might get the taste for it and Matt and James led away and there would be the home broken up for good.

'I got real mad I reckon at being stared at and Matt and James laughing away with those girls and I kicked the old motor being as it was responsible like. I must

## UP THE MIDDLE

have kicked it pretty near its heart too for it jumped ahead like an old horse and smashed into the back of a tram and no hope of going farther.

'Luke was a bit put out but not much, for there's a goodish boat waiting for him above Yarmouth and he haven't really time to be gadding away. So we picked up a launch at the landing and came back home.

'Luke reckons I'm disappointed. He says I can have the insurance money on the motor to do what I like with. I think I'll buy me a bunch of pictures and things all about the middle so's we don't have to go any more to see what it's like, and give the rest to the boys to get married quick and honest on. Then we'll all be safe and sound. Luke don't know I gave that motor a kick and I do hope he never will.'

## RACE ME, LOVE!

It was as a bloom-cheeked country lad of ten that John Dukey first entered Squire Camelace's service, receiving the title of Boots and a truly bewildering share of comfort. And because he was neat and willing as a weathercock he found favour even with old Maily, the jealous-fingered butler, from whom he acquired a crusted kind of wisdom and a solemnity of mind and bearing well suited to his thin, beautifully melancholy features.

At first he had dreaded necessary visits to the dim, cob-webbed cellars under the sprawl-pawed old house, thinking them to be foully haunted, but habit had brought understanding and when Maily died of a fit, his mouth open as if it were one o'clock and the cuckoo stuck, he went sturdily to the Squire to beg his title, upright and dignified in his words. Sucking in his cheeks Squire Camelace looked him over and turned him round to see if his seat was shiny, unexpectedly bidding him help himself from the sideboard. Whisky there was, ale, port and a drop of claret and John, knowing the tendency of the first three to rush to his feet and make them dance, chose the last, drinking with real relish, for he had been tasting broken honeycomb in the kitchen and was in need of a tongue-cutter. Grunting approval the Squire flapped his hands under his coat-tails like a turtle on the move, nodding towards the house-keys bunched like a huge, fighting crab on the shining mahogany:

'Your pay will be a pound a year for every key in addition to livery and keep,' and he went on looking and smiling at himself in the ormolu mirror while John tumbled out all in a hurry to count the keys.

## RACE ME, LOVE!

Quickly now he came to respect, then to love, the deep, quiet gloom of the cellars, going often to check and straighten, even naming and talking to the several toads living in pious security behind the butts, so that they got to know him very well and would sit pretty and watch and pant as if they'd each swallowed a watch and were waiting for it to chime. Sometimes, in a pure spirit of inquiry, he cracked a bottle and sniffed and sipped, judging a vintage for himself, his palate responding, pleased with the fragrant run of a fine wine, admirable phrases remaining in his mind so that he sometimes astonished the somewhat gluttonous Squire with a precise description of quality.

At forty then, a year after the Squire's marriage, we find him in his prime, handsome and of leisurely habits, a little sad perhaps that love had passed him by but pleased with his lot, efficient and a wise cellarer, accustomed to eat a biscuit or so and a bit of double Gloucester in quiet solitude most mornings in the dim light cast through a swimmy green traplight which was lifted but once a year to allow fresh brewings to be piped into the butts grouped like the blackened teeth of a giant against a curving inner wall. Usually some wine went with the cheese, just a glass to sweeten the day and then John went about his duties, sustained and prepared for any call, gentle and manly, quick to follow the Squire's moods and those of his lady, though it was queer to be having a woman high in the house after thirty bachelor years. The Squire was ageing then but she was young and a beauty too, and dull the great house must have seemed to her in her freshness, though she did not show it to the eye.

Although it was the Squire who handed to John a handsome watch on the day when he'd thirty years of faithful service behind him it was undoubtedly his

## RACE ME, LOVE!

wife who had prompted the gift, she being thoughtful that way and graciously aware of the value of good and faithful servants. Dangling the watch on its chain, the Squire, studying John's physique, nodded sorrowfully, wishing he had as much to offer his wife:

'Well done, John, lad, though 'tis more than a watch ye should be receiving, such a fine, upstanding fellow as you are. Have you never thought of marriage? Never! Well, well, 'tis a waiting gift in the hand of the Lord, eh, m'dear?'

Receiving the watch John blushed with pleasure and embarrassment and went exultantly away to the cellars, tempted, for the first time in his life, to celebrate the occasion with something rare and fitting. Spreading a fresh cloth upon the barrel-head under the trap-light he brought a new cheese and moved thoughtfully from bin to bin, aware that extravagance on such an occasion would be excused yet not wanting to rob the higher table if a suitable oddment could be found. After careful search he found in a cobweb-tented corner an exactly suitable item, a last magnum of Private Cuvée, 1906, many times offered but out of favour with the frivolous-palated Squire.

Bottle in hand he returned to the cheese, eating and drinking with deep appreciation, his mind pottering back over thirty years, the wine purling like sheer good news inside so that he came again and again at the bottle, exceeding a proper morning measure.

Presently, sweetly hazy in mind, but impenitent, he wandered back into the dimness of the cellar to rest awhile upon a mattress-pile of straw bottle guards, musing on old, meek contentments, drowsily desiring greater pleasure, remembering the Squire's words, imagining, dreamily, a most glorious fulfilment, a sweet fountaining of the senses in a sunny paradise.

## RACE ME, LOVE!

Not often had he pondered on the love of woman, deeming the subject unpleasant in its details, but now it seemed to him that he loved and was beloved beyond all comparison and he tossed and muttered in splendid excitement, blinking suddenly from the bud of dream at a vague, delicately feminine figure standing by his cheese and champagne, eating and drinking with fastidious relish.

Gaily amused, imagining a maid in sportive mood, John raised himself and called merrily: 'Race me, Love!' running boyishly away into the depths of the cellar. Surprised but quick to respond, Love put down her glass and came running lightly after. In brisk chase they whirled through the dusty aisles until at last, breathless, Love caught John near to the mattress-pile of straw and together they stood in light, laughing clasp, lost in the dimness but sure of each other. Glowing-minded with a memory of dream John moved clumsily but decisively, lifting her grandly, determined not to stumble, going with her to the couch of straw, the silken sweetness of her springing through him. And there he laughed and played and whispered and did as he had done in the dream, sharing a most lovely ecstasy. Hearts pounded as if following the soul in its flight, calming slowly like two young birds after a first wing-lift and tumble and presently, with a sigh, Love gravely straightened herself, kissing John once in deep gratefulness before she hastened silently away.

Alone again, terribly alone, John pondered and shook his sorely muddled head, calling loudly, pleadingly. And when there was no answer he doubted the truth of his experience, so vast and above all imagining had it been. Surely it was impossible for humans to blaze so sweetly, surely it had been but a dream born of the wine. Certainly no maid would have smelt and

## RACE ME, LOVE!

played as this Love had done. Sick at heart he pinched himself hardly, calling again and again, searching among the butts, going sadly at last to the bottle, returning with it to the straw, emptying it briskly, waiting hopefully for the lifting fire and the return of Love, fighting an intolerable drowsiness.

But Love did not come again and presently he slept heavily, dreamlessly, waking much later to the tread of the Squire and his wife, come with candles to choose a wine for the evening. Surprising John with his bottle the Squire was astonished, then angered, but his wife soothed him deftly:

‘It is right that he should dream on such a day as this and that they should be beautiful dreams. Remember he has only dreams, unlike us. . . .’

And smilingly she went away, arm-in-arm with the gaily hopeful Squire.

## THE PORT-WINE PIRATES

IT was in the early part of September that we found the barrel floating sluggishly on the tide, well out in the estuary, on a clear, quiet day after a week of storm. There were four of us, all fourteen years old and tough as door-knockers in our manner. We were owners of an old granny of a boat, quarter captains each. Captain Billocker, of the barge *Nancy Jane*, had given the boat to us, having found it waterlogged and abandoned on one of his coastwise trips. It was very old and leaky still, although we had patched it with tarred canvas and tin, and caulked the seams dozens of times. But we were proud owners and didn't mind the lumpiness of her.

We called her the *Adventure*, after Captain Kidd's packet. Captain Billocker had looked up the details for us and warned us jovially of the penalties of piracy. Short and square, blue-eyed and strong-whiskered, his beard strangely brown while his head was red, he was still pretty much of a boy himself, and had even given us a length of brass piping to mount as a gun and a couple of harpoons to repel boarders, as he put it.

At first we kept the harpoons burnished and ready for giant fish, but after a while we were using them as mere boathooks and for salvaging the treasures of the tide. I doubt whether we could have managed the barrel without them.

The barrel was an easy hundred-galloner. At first we thought it was a whale or a porpoise and stood by with the harpoons, tacking dashingly to surprise and kill. We were disappointed to find it was only a barrel, that is until we lugged at it and found it to be full and sound. Chris Purlove said it must be brandy, but the



## THE PORT-WINE PIRATES

rest of us weren't so sure. I managed to sight the stencilled OPORTO on the head as the barrel lifted on a wave and the point was settled. But, brandy or port, it was all the same to Chris and Art Chase. Lanky didn't care one way or the other.

Sensibly I was for claiming salvage money, but Art and Chris were full of *Treasure Island* and fifteen men on the Dead Man's Chest, yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum! I tried to be practical, naming penalties, pointing out that the Dead Man's Chest was only an island anyway. But they didn't care. They simply said they'd deaden my chest if I didn't shut up, so I left it at that, hauling and rowing with the rest.

It was bleak and lonely country, mainly mudflats, sandbanks and winding creeks, with gulls and wild-fowl and only an occasional barge to be seen. The tide was high and we landed the barrel successfully on Angel Island, sweating it up the beach to our camp, eager to tap and taste.

The Island wasn't much more than a marram-tied sandbank. They used to say it was haunted by angels, but all we ever saw was great rolling bits of spume big as yourself and no good or harm in them at all. We looked upon it as our property and certainly no one ever questioned our right to camp there. Much digging had shaped among the dunes a perfect hide-out, roofed and walled with wreck timbers. We even had a galley stove taken from a derelict barge, and a fine mahogany door for table. A long teak chest was stuffed with queer tinned foods, candles, sugar, jam and biscuits Art had pinched from the grocer's where he odd-jobbed. We gorged like princes and Lanky needed it most. He was a sad stick of a youngster, ragged and half-starved. His mother had boozed pretty solidly since his father was drowned, and

## THE PORT-WINE PIRATES

knocked him about terribly when the drink was in her. They lived in a leaky old cottage on the edge of the marsh and we did our off-handed best to make life sweeter for Lanky, granting him equal rights, clothing him between us as each winter came round so that our parents must have wondered at our regular carelessness in losing a shirt or a pair of trousers. And Lanky was grateful enough to break your heart, pulling his weight twice over whenever there was work to be done, just to make up for the food and company.

He didn't help much though when it came to tapping the barrel. He must have been a bit afraid, knowing what the stuff did to his mother. We pried off the tin plate tacked over the bung-hole and eased the bung, sniffing and sucking through bits of reed. It was port wine all right. Lanky said to take it easy but we didn't listen until we were well filled, red as raspberries and squalmy inside. Then we sat back like boiled puddings, singing and yarning until dark.

I can still remember the way we were slumped, all except Lanky, who sat stiffly, slightly alarmed but sensibly silent. The stove was drawing well, the metal cracking loudly, the salty driftwood flaring greenly. At times the sailcloth hung over the entrance flapped smartly back as if ghosts were peering in, the candle flames guttering and flinching. And, outside, there was the steady sound of the tide, sand hissing faintly as if paper bags were being endlessly filled. The barrel was like a fifth member, fat and comfortable and very welcome; Chris had laid his peaked pilot's cap atop of it which added to the friendly illusion. It was hard to leave and even when we did stumble out and pull grumpily for home some warm bit of each of us was left behind to sleep until we should come again.

For weeks afterwards we lived only for camp and

## THE PORT-WINE PIRATES

barrel, never once overdoing the drinking, to Lanky's great relief. Anyway, the pull back home to the quay always straightened us up. We even cooked snared rabbits and broken ducks in the wine, not out of any choice knowledge however but because, more often than not, we had forgotten to bring water. We swore a solemn blood-and-bones oath not to tell or take any wine away from the camp. No one ever suspected why we went to the Island so often, our own folk merely labelling us a bunch of romantic, salt-crazy kids with whom it was better for the household peace not to interfere.

Captain Billocker was away on a trip at the time but we were reserving a gallon or two for him, just to make up for the boat and his round good nature. It was probably the thought of him that started us thinking wider, or perhaps it was simply the wine working amiably in sweet new skins. Anyway, we got to thinking of all the decent folk who'd overlooked our misdeeds, broken windows and the like, and Chris said what a good and pleasant thing it would be to donate a bottle or two to all the good ones we knew, secretly of course, a sort of Christmas present from heaven, just a couple of bottles left on the doorstep after dark.

It seemed risky but well worth doing and we hunted diligently for bottles, washing them scrupulously and siphoning the wine into them, lining them neatly on a shelf. The gift was to be two bottles apiece to two dozen folk in all, and when the list was done, names considered, rejected and reconsidered, Art had another idea. Why not give a bottle or so to a bunch of the unworthy ones as well, just to put them in their place, make them think a bit; it would be port all right but with a good dose of salts in each bottle just to ease their ideas, pull them up short as it were.

## THE PORT-WINE PIRATES

So we started collecting bottles all over again, stealing some from the crates at the back of the 'Rising Sun', digging in the dump on Christian Sands for others, even taking some from the parson's garden where they'd been stuck in neck down to form a border to the path. And Art supplied the salts, noble tins full of it hooked from the grocer's shelf. Now that I think of it we should in all fairness have given the whole walloping barrelful of port to the grocer to make up for his losses, but I don't suppose he'd have looked at it in the right way. We were very methodical about the whole job, dipping the corked necks of the medicine in pitch just so that we should make no mistake in delivery.

There was a good clinking boatload of bottles when we left the Island on Christmas Eve. We'd arranged to tie up in a creek well clear of the village and deliver in different directions. We even left bottles on our own doorsteps so that suspicion should not rest on us. The plan worked smoothly, almost too smoothly for our riotous tastes. We met no one who questioned and got safely away from each port of call, speculating gleefully on results. We had a parting swig at the boat on our own account before turning homewards, Lanky rambling sadly off with the two bottles for his own step in his pockets.

Lanky had been particularly quiet about the whole scheme, not exactly disapproving, but vaguely worried. We thought it was simply because he'd been having a specially bad time with his mother and let it go at that.

We had arranged to meet the next morning on the quay as usual and had whipped together to get him a jack-knife. We had it with us all ready on time, wrapped in half a dozen unnecessary thicknesses of paper, together with some odds and ends of food we'd

## THE PORT-WINE PIRATES

sneaked to make a bit of Christmas for him. We were very happy, sprawled in the boat, wondering how the salts were working, only mildly impatient at Lanky's delay.

But after half an hour we weren't mildly impatient any more. We couldn't understand it, for Lanky was usually first in the boat, even more anxious than the rest of us for the freedom of Angel Island. Art said he didn't deserve the jack-knife for holding us up in this way, but Chris, more charitable, thought that Lanky wasn't to blame, that something must have happened and maybe we'd better go along to the cottage to find out.

We weren't very keen, remembering how Lanky's mother had chased us with a fire-iron the last time we went inquiring. Still, Lanky might be needing us, might be locked up again like a dog in the coalhouse. We owed it to him to find out, help if we could.

Very reluctantly we climbed ashore, following the dyke, only hurrying a bit when we saw the *Nancy Jane* at anchor, sure of a welcome there at any rate when we'd got away from the cottage.

The cottage was an ugly, black, tarred slug of a place high on the seawall, lonely enough to make your heart flinch even in sunlight. The chimney was dead but the door was open and we stopped at a safe distance, whistling thinly for Lanky. He came through the doorway after a moment, ambling miserably towards us. Art began to cuss, wanting to know why he'd kept us waiting — Art always did think of Lanky as the poor relation anyway — but Chris told him to pipe down and we went slowly to meet Lanky. His long, knuckly face was curiously white and bright.

'Ready?'

But Lanky shook his head: 'I got to be going for the

## THE PORT-WINE PIRATES

police,' he said startlingly and very slowly and clearly as if he'd said it a hundred times to himself already: 'She's dead and it's my fault.'

'Dead! But how?'

'It was the port. She drank it quick and then she got looking for more and drank some bottles of iodine I pinched. I been making a new sail for the boat, sort of surprise, and I meant to stain it like the bargies do.' He called it eyeodinnny, but we knew what he meant: 'She drank the lot and now she's a goner and they'll say I did it a-purpose, 'count of the way she walloped me. . . .'

We gaped unbelievably, seeing Lanky in a new, proud light. For myself I felt as if cold oil were drowning the Christmas warmth of my mind. Chris said suddenly and bluntly that the blame was half ours for distributing the port and starting things, and what the hell were we to do? Was she really dead?

Lanky flapped a hand towards the cottage and we followed him excitedly and uneasily. I didn't know what death smelt like but I was sure I could smell it on the threshold. Maybe it was only the usual sour smell of the place, but for me it was death twice over, all brightness of movement gone and only a festering stillness left.

No doubt about her being dead and no need to hold a mirror over her. Lanky had been trying to make up his mind to burn the place down, her with it, but maybe it was better to tell the police, get it straight.

'Not until we've seen the Captain,' Chris said decisively: 'He'll know best what do to. Shut the door, Lanky, and let's go.'

The wind had never smelt so sweet before or the sky seemed so grandly wide. Not for anything did I mean to enter that cottage again and I think the others felt

## THE PORT-WINE PIRATES

the same. We ran most of the way to the *Nancy Jane* for a mixture of reasons; we wanted the ugly business settled; we wanted good clean distance between us and the cottage and we badly wanted to feel Captain Billocker's strength and cheerfulness behind us.

The Captain was at home and we felt at once less sick and soiled. The *Nancy Jane* looked like a great, comfortable duck at her moorings and smoke was tufting from the galley chimney. We bounced noisily aboard and the Captain's round red head popped through the hatch. He'd a frypan in hand and he spat an olive stone smartly at us. He was always eating green olives; he bought them by the keg and said the saltiness of them was like a good hard kiss, which didn't make much sense to us then.

'Thought it was raining coal,' he said: 'Come on down and have some breakfast.'

We followed on down all of a heap. 'It's about Lanky,' and three of us told the tale so that it must have sounded like a sinner's nightmare. But the Captain got the hang of it pretty quick.

'She deserved it all right,' we insisted, and called on Lanky to show his bruises.

Sadly and reluctantly Lanky pulled off his ragged jersey and the Captain looked, sucking in his plump lips.

'Aye, she deserved it all right and a good riddance. All right, boys, let's eat and we'll think it over.'

I didn't have much appetite myself, but it was a treat to see Lanky mopping that fat bacon and fried bread. He didn't like to ask for more so we asked for him. The Captain didn't say much until he'd drunk a second great mug of near-black tea and filled his stumpy pipe.

'Better quit fretting, all of you. No need to worry. I'll go tell the sergeant just what happened and we'll write it off as an accident and no blame to anyone.'

## THE PORT-WINE PIRATES

And if everyone's willing Lanky can sign on with me. It's rough going, but wholesome. How about it?'

Lanky tried to stutter his thanks and willingness and Christmas came alive for us all once more.

'Lucky I called in on the way down by the look of things,' the Captain said: 'I'm off again on the next tide, but there's time enough to get it all fixed. I want you boys to go home and say nothing. I reckon you'll want to know which way the wind blows so you take my glass and watch out for us as we go down. If all's well and Lanky's safe aboard I'll be flying my old storm bird. We'll be gone a fortnight and by that time no one'll be worrying any more. So long, boys. Come on, Lanky, son, we got to be moving.'

Very happily we tumbled off, Lanky muddled for words but happy too. I had the Captain's glass safe in an inside pocket, keeping it so all through the long meal at home. It had begun to blow outside and my mother thought maybe I should stay in and play tamely with the gifts of Christmas. But I protested that there was something terribly important I'd forgotten and that I wouldn't be gone long anyway. Art and Chris were already waiting on the mound behind the fish-curing sheds, very impatient for the glass.

The tide was spinning strongly in the creeks and gutters, the rising wind scribbling strange, swift things across it. A bend of the estuary hid the *Nancy Jane* from us but we should have a full view as she cleared for open water. We were silently envious of Lanky, of the free, open life ahead of him, yet glad that luck had made it so. Turn and turn about we gazed through the telescope. The wind was whipping odd scraps before it so that once Art wriggled excitedly, thinking he'd sighted the barge when it was only a dried fish-tail skipping by.



## THE PORT-WINE PIRATES

Then we saw it altogether, sailing strongly like a grey cloud come to earth, the storm bird flying aloft. The storm bird was one of the Captain's half-useful, half-humorous ideas, a little white-painted barrel with a great tuft of goose-feathers at one end and a broom-stick neck at the other. He said he could always tell by its behaviour exactly what the weather intended, although we didn't quite see how.

Still, there the storm bird was and below must be Lanky, safe and sound. We looked through the glass in turn until the *Nancy Jane* dropped out of sight. Then I pocketed the glass and we all went thoughtfully home, feeling a little heroic.

I had wild dreams that night, the next too, even sleep-walking a little, my mother assuming gluttony and halving my rations. At odd times in my room I polished the Captain's glass, imagining his grip on it, the stare of his clear blue eye through the lenses.

I have the glass yet. It was the sight and feel of it, plus a gift of port, that brought this story to paper. We never saw the Captain again, or Lanky either, for the *Nancy Jane* foundered for some reason we never knew. The storm bird was washed ashore twenty miles down the coast. Everyone knew the fantastic shape of it. Chris came weepily to tell me. We weren't kids any more after that. Fifty times we talked of going to Angel Island once more, but we never did go, and the half-barrel of port must be there yet, along with the tinned food, buried deep under drifting sand, waiting ready for the meek spirit of Lanky if ever he should come homeward with the angels.

## LITTLE PARLIAMENT

TEN years ago the Little Parliament was said to be haunted. It was a shabby, trussed turkey of a place in those days, standing lonely at Gunpop Crossways, with no quality in its beer or comfort in its parlour.

At night, slow, ponderous footsteps were heard on the wooden cellar steps, footsteps that came purposefully so far then turned heavily back. There were half-a-dozen stories as to whose ghost it was and so fearful were all of them that no one ever had the pluck to fling open the cellar door at the crucial moment and look.

But that was before the coming of Kate Winter and her broken, half-witted husband. Kate was the daughter of a seaport publican and she'd married Fred when he was soldiering and as fine a man as you'd wish to see. Then he'd been blown up and half buried for days and thrown back on her hands more dead than alive.

Most of the time he sat hunched and still as if buried yet, scarcely sensible to words or pain or pleasure, breathing shortly, frostily, midway between life and death, Kate tending him, guiding him through the days with a patience rare and untragic.

Kate herself was a fine sturdy woman with rich chestnut hair piled handsomely into the image of a sitting horse as I heard a simple man drunk to the point of poetry swear once, strong regular teeth and wide, candid grey eyes, not beautiful, but very comely and comforting in her wise frankness.

The village foretold disaster when she took over the Little Parliament; a woman wasn't nowadays capable of defeating ghosts and the ill-luck they stirred. But Kate only grinned and when the footsteps sounded again on

## LITTLE PARLIAMENT

the cellar steps she flung open the door and flashed a torch and found the ghost to be nothing more terrible than a great toad plopping its way upwards on some incomprehensible errand. She didn't kill it as most would have done but let it bide; neither did she foster the ghost legend for the sake of custom, preferring to build her reputation on fine beer served in perfect condition and on comfort of a quality that made many a man regret his own stiff-natured wife.

Kate worked hard and willingly and prospered as she deserved. She kept some pigs and a cow or two in the twelve acre back of the pub and made her own butter and cheeses and baked her own bread so that a bite with a pint was a perfect meal. Most days too, round about noon, there was bacon pie or a cut of new Cornish slab cake for the sweet-toothed.

In winter the fire was never low and in summer the place was dairy cool with green elder branches hung to defeat the flies. The dart-board was always in champion condition, soaked regularly and laid between whites under wet sacks, and there was Kate herself to show us all how the game should be played. She was the best player I've ever seen. She told us once that Fred had taught her before the war smashed him and now it seemed to be an affectionate duty to her to play her best as if she hoped one day to arouse Fred to his old brilliance, awaken his closed senses. But Fred seemed to us all to be gone beyond our own lively world, to be caught like a mouse under a careless heel, and there were times when I, for one, hated to see Kate wasted that way, handmaid to nothing as it were. But she herself was strong and faithful, hopeful still of finding again the man she had wed in that starved springtime of her life.

In a year or two the Little Parliament was without

## LITTLE PARLIAMENT

equal in the district, was, in fact, living up to its name perhaps for the first time in its history. In every sense it was a little parliament, echoing the excitements of the larger one but finding different decisions, being without vanity and nearer to the first truth of bread and love and sleep. Opinions were expressed with well-flavoured ability, the talk touching all things, improved and edged as it were by our steady recognition of human limitations; foreign and home talk, religion and wider speculation as to who made that which is called God, shrewd, warming talk, sincere and kindly and humorous too, asking of man only his best as he was able.

Government and the wars of government occupied us often, some of us arguing that group government was the finest possible since all notions and reforms were threshed through many brains and vacuums before adoption, that rashness had time to cool and timidity time to grow. Then there would be others arguing that in the threshing the main point was often lost entirely, that a sword very often became a paper fastener and a mere harmless plea for more exercise among sailors was as likely to lead to an issue of skipping ropes as the building of a dozen new battleships.

Talking one day in this strain a stranger told a story. He was a cattle haulier named Fawlcot from somewhere up country, a decent fellow with a liking for gin in his beer; he said the beer made a man of him and the gin was as good as the company of a nice young woman. He meant it, too; his mind was like that, nine-tenths honest endeavour and one-tenth unpredictable subtlety. He'd a sparky way of talking:

'There's no system for betting on, a clear run through life; it's all cooked and in a language we don't understand. Government thinks it knows what's best

## LITTLE PARLIAMENT

for us but I ain't got much faith meself; townsfolk think the countryman's plodding daft and the country-folk know damn well who the daft ones be.

'But that wasn't what I was going to say. With no man knowing just what's right ye can never be sure what'll happen; and Government's like that six hundred times over! Bound to miss one point in two. I remember a cock-eyed thing that happened during the war, sort of proves something. It was a funny go, makes me laugh now to think about it. It looked like the war was going to last for ever and they weren't particular about age any more. So long as you could move somehow and could tell the difference between an aeroplane and a cock sparrow they weren't particular.

'Most of the chaps in my lot were under age, all of us jumping eager to enjoy the fun, guns and horses and plenty of give in the girls — you know what I mean. Training was a lark; we weren't kids any more but full-grown men. The rough stuff was to come but we weren't worrying then.

'For the final polish they sent us to Bedrock, on the south coast, with a town on either side of us and plenty of time to kill, a different sort of job from dead and alive Birdham in the Midlands where we'd come from.

'We began poshing ourselves up to meet the demand. We saw all of a sudden-like how damned rough-tailored our breeches and tunics were. We used to talk it over in the harness room, how easy it would be to get a civvy tailor to improve the cut. But the stuff wasn't nearly old enough for replacement or new enough to be worth cutting about. Damned awkward and it made us pretty sore to be losing ground where smarter regiments were making hay.

'Something had to be done and it was a chap named

## LITTLE PARLIAMENT

Brisker who did it. We were chewing it over once more in the harness room one rainy afternoon. This Brisker was filing a spur iron to a better fit but presently he dropped the spur and began filing away at the knees of his breeches, rasping the stuff threadbare. Then he shabbied the cloth with a bit of grease and dirt and winked at the one or two of us who'd noticed what he was up to. In two days he was strutting about in new breeches which he'd had rebuilt by a little jobbing tailor in the town, and in four days he was better than married to a restaurant keeper's daughter, living off the fat of the land all ways.

'After that files were worth their weight in gold. We wore out knees and elbows and applied for new gear. Wasting the country's money if you like but we weren't sure what was coming and wanted a bit of fun just in case we didn't come home. Half the company wangled new gear and the idea was spreading through Bedrock like smoke. Then one day a sergeant caught a bunch of lads at work with the files and like the tyke he was he reported us all, promising hell fire twice over. We were only youngsters and we believed him. It began to look like a full-sized crime to us. All leave and passes were stopped and we got properly windy. Then one day we heard the verdict: "In future files will only be issued under an officer's permit."

'That was all. Somehow they'd missed the point. By God, we did laugh. Even now I can see those chaps filing away, some of 'em working on their backsides as well for a change.'

And Fawlcot grabbed the file we used to point the darts, screwed himself up and worked away till we choked. Even Fred was laughing, but we didn't notice him for a minute or two. When we did we stopped laughing pretty quick. He was standing behind the bar,

## LITTLE PARLIAMENT

face wrinkling and puffing; it reminded me of a rat in a paper bag.

Kate was staring, hand to breast as if to hold her jumping heart. He was trying to speak and, slowly, the words came, sensible but rusty as it were.

‘Don’t look at me like that, Kate. . . .’

He scrubbed his face perplexedly, scrubbed a new calm face into being. Fawlcot gaped: ‘What the hell’s up?’

Kate answered in a whisper: ‘Fred was at Bedrock, too.’

Fred himself was puzzled by his own stooped shape. Stiffly, painfully, he shrugged himself to a soldierly uprightness, walking round the bar, taking the file from Fawlcot, weighing it thoughtfully.

‘That sergeant gave us hell for that. We tossed up who should shoot him when we got out there and I got the job.’

Then he saw the box of darts and picked one up, touching up the point dexterously with the file, looking for the board, measuring his distance and throwing the dart easily to the dead centre.

Kate grabbed him joyfully, tearfully, and he touched her affectionately:

‘What’s wrong, girl, hast had some trouble?’

## DIGNITY, BE DAMNED!

It all began rather more than thirty years ago. I had meant to be very thorough, to dig up all the facts and write a sort of saga, but then I thought of all the names that would have to be included, fat bugs, little bugs, no bugs, and great pantomime skeletons of bugs, and, I thought, why the hell should I stir such a broth? Even those who had benefited most had mocked Luzzatti's pawnbroking system, so what would the sweaty, nose-ground multitude say to a book that attempted to show his greatness, to prove the rare stimulus to art resulting over many years from his system of loans. They called him bloodsucker in his lifetime, but, now he is dead, they wouldn't stop at that. I won't be the one to open his grave for such a horde of bone-pickers. I'll just bury this sketch of him among these pages for my own satisfaction. The critical ones, the saw-flies of creation, won't ever get this far, but perhaps Martinway (that is as unlike his true name as may be) and a few others will see it and understand the toast I offer.

Not many now will remember that little restaurant of Luzzatti's in Greek Street. It was a very humble sort of place in those days, with less than a dozen tables and only Luzzatti himself and a flustered Italian girl to cook and serve. But the food was good and very cheap and trade was brisk. Luzzatti had learned all about cooking from his parents. They had wanted to educate him for some such post as Italian Ambassador out of the profits of their own little restaurant, but Luzzatti had not shared their enthusiasm. He had seemed to have no ambition then other than to sleep with a different girl every night. As a young man he had dressed exquisitely, a little too colourfully, perhaps,



## DIGNITY, BE DAMNED!

so that a young English-Jew had once sneered at him and called him a bottle of olive oil in ham frills, called him so only once, though, for Luzzatti had stuck him very neatly with the spring-knife he carried. This impulsiveness pleased the girls of the district, and for a time he was like a Turkish lily visited by innumerable butterflies. Scandalized, his parents disowned him in favour of a younger, more studious son.

Unperturbed, Julius took stock and promptly opened his own little restaurant, exchanging his fine clothes for tables and chairs, a lily gone profitably to seed, cooking quite happily behind a screen at the back of the shop, living frugally, making and saving money, casting a shrewd eye at the great restaurants as he passed with his market bags in the early morning, thinking that one day he'd have his choice of them.

For two years Julius occupied that little shop in Greek Street. By this time one or two walls had been knocked away and a staircase built to an upper room to provide more space for his patrons. Sometimes Julius called them not patrons but something else, under his breath, scowling ferociously, but always smiling blandly again when he went to ask if everything was satisfactory. They were indeed a mixed lot, mere coffee-house custom, as Julius swore contemptuously. There were a few Italian-Jews who came regularly and argued interminably over some trifling political issue, a great many smug and patronizing English merchants and chief clerks who brought their frumpy wives and ordered wine as if it were God's own blood, a few gentlemen, strayed like frogs from their own particular stew-ponds, in the company of gay, salamander-like females, and, lastly, a queer, hungry collection of free-loving students, shabby and exotic, some gentle, some

## DIGNITY, BE DAMNED!

blatant, but all intensely concerned with problems of Art, of Life, and even of Death.

For a long time Julius did not know what to make of these earnest, hard-swearing youngsters, painters and writers and accomplished nobodies. Sometimes they dragged him into their discussions, reading from their own works or drawing excitedly on his table linen. 'For God's sake, Julius, tell us the truth, is it good or lousy?' 'What's the first thing a woman does on getting out of bed? Christ! he's right! Don't we all!' 'Now, Julius, don't you agree that sincerity should be the mainspring of all art?'

Julius, out of his Italian-Jewish shrewdness, almost always found a sound answer, and he was amused at the respect accorded him by all these simple, earnest ones. Like children in a strange, dangerous garden, he thought, yet he had to admit that he valued their respect. He studied them and their problems and liked them, so that he was not entirely unprepared to deal with the two who, having eaten one day, found, when they came to pay, that they had no money. One of them had been robbed, they explained.

Julius sat down at their table and listened quietly, and, equally quietly, soberly, the one who had been robbed, a painter, a queer mixture of age and youth, thin, unshaven, ragged and shabby as an old crow, explained what had happened. He had been to a dealer's to try and sell a picture, but instead of buying the picture they had bought only the frame — it was a pleasantly carved one — paying him thirty shillings for it, with, probably, a customer for it at thirty pounds in their minds. He'd been half a mind to throw the picture in as well just to show them that magnanimity was not their copyright, but Martinway had dissuaded him. Anyway he had put the coins in his purse, and now the

## DIGNITY, BE DAMNED!

purse was gone. They had walked from the dealer's, stopping only once to watch a whole German band arguing with an English tin-whistler. Yes, there'd been a bit of a crowd.

Julius believed the story, but that seemed no reason why he should be the loser. 'May I see the picture?' he asked, and, grimly, the painter held up the canvas. Julius eyed it carefully, his heavy bullet head on one side, impressed. He knew what he liked, and he liked the picture; the wild, flowing strength of figures and the heat of colour was like a moment of perfect passion, caught in all its racing beauty. 'How much had you hoped to get for it?' The painter shrugged. 'I asked five pounds.' Julius rubbed a finger slowly, delicately over his razor-blue chin, considering. It was two years since he'd gambled a penny.

'I don't want it particularly, but it's good. It's like love at its best. It makes me happy. I will loan you four pounds on it. Any time within six months from to-day you may repay me and reclaim the picture, but after six months it becomes mine. What do you say?'

The painter shrugged and combed at his rough-cut hair with his thin, grimy fingers. Martinway stared cynically. 'Bit undignified, isn't it? I didn't know you did pawnbroking.'

'Dignity, be damned!' Julius stood up, hard-faced and unwinking. 'Is it dignified to be unable to pay for the food you have eaten?'

The painter shoved over the canvas and held out his hand. 'Four pounds, repayable in six months or the picture's yours. For God's sake, Martinway, shut your trap. He's doing us a damned good turn, doing what the bloody dealers won't do. Who the hell are you to talk about dignity? We can't eat with it! He's a sport

## DIGNITY, BE DAMNED!

and if you had any sense you'd be offering to bind his ledgers. . . .'

Julius paid over the money and was scrupulously repaid the cost of the meal. He stared amusedly at the sulky Martinway. 'What is *your* trade, my friend?'

But Martinway only scowled and sucked at his empty pipe, and the painter answered for him. 'He binds books better than any man living, but he can't talk without insulting somebody. Won't take orders. Too bloody independent by half, but he can't help it. Show him the last job, Martin. . . .'

Boiling angry, Martinway dragged from his pocket a newspaper-wrapped package and slapped it down before Julius as if it were a pound of his own flesh. Julius unwrapped the paper and lifted the book to examine it. It was a Bible, exquisitely bound in some curious, blue-black leather that was like a night sky in June, and on this smoky blackness was a splendid design of Christ and the loaves and fishes, a Christ tremendously alive and capable of miracles.

Martinway blundered to his feet, tapped his empty pipe from force of habit, and grunted thinly, sarcastically: 'Keep it, they say it's a good book. . . .' And away he stalked. The painter grinned an apology and hurried to follow him, but Julius stopped him. 'Give him this. Same terms as the picture.'

In the following months Julius had but little time to think of book or picture. Once or twice he took one or the other from his safe and looked at them appreciatively, but his mind was busy with a scheme to secure larger premises, to step a little higher. It was rather more than six months later that he made the move into what most people call the original Luzzatti's, hiring two Italian boys as waiters and a stout genius of a cook for the kitchen. Still much of the work was done

## DIGNITY, BE DAMNED!

by himself. He missed nothing. His anger was cold and terrible when some stupid mistake was made, an over-charge or a contradiction of some guest in his positiveness, but he could be patient, too, when willingness was evident. One of the Italian boys remained with him from first to last and to him Julius was like the father he would have chosen had the choice been his.

For want of other ornament, and to empty the safe for other matter, Julius hung the Adam and Eve, as he had come to think of it, high upon a wall of the restaurant, simply framed that it might be safe from the pranks of the students, some of whom would have been very capable of adding gross details when his back was turned. But it did not hang there long, for one day a newspaper reporter, who wandered in sometimes like a goat into a ballroom, came with a tall, monocled Irishman, helping him to stand on the table under the picture that he might see it better. Then they sat down at the table and Julius served them himself with a meal, urbane and pleased with the Irishman's knowledge of food. The reporter made no attempt at introduction, only gulped food as if it were cement to stop a leak, winked expansively at Julius and bolted away. The Irishman presented a card, but the name was unknown to Julius and he was not impressed, even though he smelt money. He brought brandy and a cigar, and the Irishman mentioned his errand.

'I hate talking business, it's like a purge after that excellent meal, but, the fact is, I want to buy that picture. . . .'

Julius acknowledged the compliment and forgot it. For himself, business was his life; he suspected that business was the Irishman's only waking interest, too, and was mistrustful of his diffidence. He looked up at the picture and possession of it pleased him. Still,

## DIGNITY, BE DAMNED!

he would not mind parting with it, if, in so doing, he earned the means of acquiring something more immediately useful. He shook his head, and the movement was beautiful in its suggestion of a treasure realized. 'I like it. It is not for sale. I am sorry.'

The Irishman winced, realizing that the fruit hung not so low as the reporter had suggested. 'May I suggest a price of fifty pounds?'

Julius smiled sadly. 'I'm afraid you do not quite appreciate its quality.'

The Irishman stared, cracking the leaf of his cigar with fingers too eager to reveal the state of his mind. Julius offered another cigar. 'Two hundred pounds is the price, if you really want it,' he said briefly. 'But I would still rather not part with it. It's beautiful, and, well, I knew the artist. . . .'

The Irishman sighed. 'Done,' he said mournfully. 'I am buying it on commission. With luck I shall get two hundred guineas for it. A hard life. Still, I am pleased to have met you.' Gloomily he counted out notes. 'Will you get it down for me?'

Julius lifted the picture down, carrying it to the door. 'Thank you. Good night.' The Irishman paused. 'I shall pray to God that you stick to your trade and not intrude on mine.'

Julius smiled but would not promise. 'I take things as I find them,' he said, but even he did not guess that he had found the means to success.

From that day Julius let it be known that he was not averse to loaning money on the security of pictures, but they must be good, must satisfy him, who knew nothing about technique, but must depend on his own intuitive grasp of shape and colour and the larger shape so subtly indicated. Of course, he made mistakes, but generally his judgment was sound. In a short while he

## DIGNITY, BE DAMNED!

came to recognize genius however queer its manner. Slowly, from that time, the style of his restaurant changed. A new and very definite life surged through it. Artists and models, writers and agents and publishers, with a fair sprinkling of moneyed friends, now ate his food and played with the moon and the stars under the influence of his wines. Art was dressed and stripped, ran naked, and was dressed again. The true ones worked by day and came to Luzzatti's at night to eat and shout and laugh, grateful for this place where playtime was so abundantly possible and where business could be mixed if the screws were unusually tight. Three cheers for Luzzatti and his pawnshop!

Rigorously Julius insisted on his terms of cash down, according to his assessment, and the opportunity of redemption within six months at the same figure. No agreement was ever signed, but the system worked admirably. One at a time he acquired the works of the best of the younger school of that time, all giants to-day, and Luzzatti's pawnshop became generally recognized as a godsend for struggling genius. A few of the pictures were redeemed, but not many. A little money was valuable at a time when growth was so urgent; it didn't matter who owned the pictures so long as the artist was enabled to make others. Respecting his judgment, the restaurant became a kind of intellectual circus with Julius as ringmaster. Here the best might be shown and applauded, the worst held to ridicule, and, because of Julius's integrity, there was never any doubt as to which was good or bad.

It is hard to say now exactly when Julius began accepting manuscripts in pawn. Often their manuscripts were the only things a few writers possessed of even problematical value. This was new ground and Julius went cautiously, demanding time for considera-

tion. He read the manuscripts, hunting details of the published ones among them, their public reception, the number of copies sold, and the status of the publishers, information easily come by since all kinds met under his roof. But, always, his final decision depended on whether he himself liked the stuff, whether it had value for him apart from all other merits. He could not possibly have described very accurately what his judgment was based on, what he demanded. Sincerity, certainty, style, evidence of a genuine philosophy, signs of growth towards a sun undazzling to the writer, breath of something rare and beautiful, even insanely beautiful, all these things were important. But, more important still, perhaps, was his judgment of the man himself, his manner, his talk, or no talk. Probably that was the whole secret of Julius's success at pawnbroking, his cold, faithful judgment of men.

Hearing again one day of Martinway, arrogant and deep in poverty as ever, Julius insisted on peace between them, employing him to bind the manuscripts acquired under the pawnbroking system, to read them and design perfectly appropriate bindings. Time did not matter. Julius contracted to pay him a weekly wage, and it was this arrangement which saved Martinway. For the first time in his life he was contented, doing what he wanted to do at his own pace, without interference. No longer harassed, forced to eat dirt for money to live, he gave of his best, his exquisite best, which sometimes shamed the authors when they saw their own work so magnificently coated, their quality subtly coined in the cartoon drawn so flowingly on the leather.

Martinway, slowly, dropped his weapons before Julius, admiring him for his shrewdness and insight. As they read the manuscripts, they compared views,



## DIGNITY, BE DAMNED!

and Martinway, honest and shrewd enough in judging the artistry of a piece of work, could not but appreciate Julius's superior, instinctive knowledge and wider understanding, his courageous dipping of every problem into logic with an almost chemically accurate result. It was as much a gift as was his practical assessing of values for pawnbroking purposes. Knowing his men, their aims and way of living, Julius usually gave the figure asked, sometimes doubling it when he thought they had been unreasonably modest. With pictures he was sure; with books and manuscripts not so sure, but sure enough. As a dealer or publisher he could have made an easy fortune, but his ambition was larger, more genial.

Enjoying the friendship of the solid and wise ones, the wayward, dream-roped ones, known and unknown, Julius himself ripened. Agents and dealers and publishers came to Luzzatti's, and Julius talked with them, frank and courteous, and as a result of his opinions pictures were bought and books published. In his quiet way he became a power. Martinway, on one of the rare occasions when he drank himself off the chain, recalled to a crowded table Julius's beginnings as a pawnbroker, and thereafter another name was added to the several already in use: 'Dignity, be Damned!' And Julius did not mind. He was master, after all, of himself and of them, and what they called him did not matter. After all, Dignity, be Damned! wasn't a bad motto for such a revolutionary establishment. They laughed at his pawnbroking, but most of them had cause to be grateful to him. If he rode his judgment right he'd climb higher than they thought possible and they'd never know how they'd been used as stepping-stones.

And so it happened, so quickly and quietly that no

## DIGNITY, BE DAMNED!

one had time to be astonished. A painter died and prices soared, and Julius was found to be possessed of most of his finest works, all contributed under the system which had kept him fed and housed through the years when the world ignored his work. Now Julius had his revenge, and, though he would have denied it, the wife of the painter found a gift in her hand one morning, a gift that made her gasp at its magnificence, for it was a portion of the fortune Julius had realized on his collection of her husband's works. The dealers, soured, had a new name for him then: 'Six months Luzzatti.' They used it often from that time onwards. Julius sold and saved. Writers became famous, and there was Julius sitting pretty with all their early manuscripts marvellously bound by Martinway and priced like a treasure out of Samarkand. But that did not prevent the continuance of the system.

Bland and tireless, Julius worked and waited, and then, one day, impelled by a chance-caught word that old Frankl was ailing and cornered, he went and bought him out, lock, stock and barrel, at his own price, and Frankl's, the world-famous, palatial Frankl's, became Luzzatti's, and lost nothing by the transfer. Julius smiled now to think of that shabby little shop in Greek Street. He smiled, too, when his parents, humble patriarchs, wrote to say that his brother had failed, for all his education, to keep their own little restaurant afloat, and he offered them an income if they would retire from business; not that he feared their competition but he would prefer that only one Luzzatti's existed.

Unhurriedly Julius altered his new restaurant as it deserved, and his staff was a staff of experts. Frankl's had had a following of singers and musicians, and these remained, pleased with Julius's dictatorship. Kings

## DIGNITY, BE DAMNED!

and lords ate there and felt that this was Bohemia as it should be. World-famous singers, come for supper after triumph, sang because Luzzatti asked them to sing, and were not insulted when an equally world-famous explorer spoke afterwards on icebergs . . . There was a room whose walls were covered with the signatures of the great, and Julius called them all 'My friends', and they, the famous ones, were pleased and felt that life at last was just and right that such a genius should be spent on their comfort.

With the years Julius had grown stouter and his hair and moustaches were grey. He dressed as faultlessly as he had done as a young man, but now his taste was quiet and perfect. He was shaved three times a day, and often these brief times in the quietness of his top floor room were the only moments of peace in his day. He was never seen without a cigar and he was never too busy not to be able to choose a wine to match the quality of some special guest. And his guests were delighted and suitably conscious of honour done since he chose wines unobtainable anywhere else in the world. For years now Luzzatti's agents had bought great wines all over Europe and his stock was unequalled.

He worked, if that were possible, harder than ever, scrupulous over every detail of his great establishment. Food and wines and service were perfect. He was always on hand to bid good-bye to the last of the celebrities as they went in the early hours of morning, and was about again hours later, examining the consignments from the markets, shaved and keen and smoking a cigar, not content to leave such overseeing always to his managers, excellent though they were.

He was the friend of all, gracious and unfailing. Luzzatti's — all knew it. The shabbiest of writers and artists went there to eat and drink and talk and pawn

## DIGNITY, BE DAMNED!

their works, sure of sympathy, and the successful ones went there, too. No one was too great or too small, and by Julius's genius they mixed to each other's advantage.

Deep in the basement was old Frankl's strong-room, and Julius found it useful for his collection of pictures and manuscripts. Sometimes he would take a dealer or an inquiring millionaire from shelf to shelf, and they would be amused at the hanging labels with just two dates written on them in Julius's squat, heavy handwriting. Never a hint at the amount loaned on each. Julius kept such details in his head. His memory was extraordinary. They would be amused and then amazed at the treasures there, for in thirty years Julius had accumulated an incomparable collection. Usually they bought to the limit of their purses, and he'd say what they were thinking as he locked the door and watched them go, carrying books and pictures, unaware of their own lack of dignity: 'Dignity, be Damned!'

Martinway, looking across from his workshop, would laugh with Julius. For the two men had become true friends. Martinway, happy at his work, with everything provided and a small, sufficient income, had mellowed. He could be cynical still, but not at Julius's expense. Julius might be a Jew, hard and unscrupulous but he'd done more for art in thirty years than all the dealers and millionaires put together. His pawn-broking system had helped the geniuses to find their feet, given them faith and a chance to live before recognition, always tardy, came. He deserved all the money he had ever made.

They had long talks, Julius and Martinway, in that snug, basement shop, long silences, too, while Martinway worked, unaware of his own genius. Latterly he had begun using gems in a few of his bindings, and it was as if the bright pieces were a visible fruit of his

imagination. The smell of the workshop, of leather and glue and wood and a hundred other things pleased Julius deeply, for it was like the smell of the pool at which all these fellows drank, a tangible link with their star-snatching. It made Julius feel less lonely. For, for all success, he was unaccountably lonely at times, troubled, foolishly, by his lack of imagination, of that strange knowledge which made life such an adventure for Martinway and his life. There was no pleasure in women for him any more; they were all alike, trying to grab what he had grabbed, but without risking anything.

He wished, sometimes, that he could gamble at the card-table, but they were all such poor opponents once he'd judged the way of their minds. It was too easy and foolish. Sometimes he regretted his own gift of perception; it made a man too lonely. Martinway, lanky, grizzled, happy-handed Martinway, lost in the troubled work of his designs, was safe from such loneliness, and, if he could, Julius would have envied him. A clever devil. Of late years Julius had hated to part with any of his bindings, and he'd curse himself for a sentimental old fool and ask twice the figure he had intended, afterwards showering banknotes down upon Martinway as he worked, amused and restored when he brushed them irritably away and swore richly, amazingly, at such an unseemly interruption.

A good fellow, Martinway. All he asked of life was two hundred a year and the right to work as he liked. Once Julius had asked whether it were wise for an artist to have a settled income and Martinway had answered curtly, though he knew that Julius only wanted confirmation of his own belief. 'Saves him using his brain for bait. Any artist, the real thing, has got the greatest taskmaster of all inside him, but you'd

## DIGNITY, BE DAMNED!

hardly expect the money-bound fools of this earth to see that much. . . .’

Long ago, Julius had left two hundred a year for life to Martinway, but he hadn’t mentioned it for fear that he would walk out and never return. Perhaps twice a year Martinway did walk out on one of his necessary sow-hunts, as he called them, looking as if he might never return. He would go without a word, be away for three or four days and then return like one from the dead. No one ever knew where he went, not even Julius. While he was away Julius always felt curiously anxious and impatient, not at the thought of time wasted, but because he wanted to see what strange blooms Martinway would bring back in his brain this time. Smoking evenly at his cigar, Julius would wander round the workshop, picking up tools and the littered designs, and the hum of the restaurant overhead would be like the groaning of unoiled machinery to his mind, a monster groaning everlastingly for his care.

Unusually tired, Julius went late one night to Martinway’s shop, wanting to show him a painting he had received in pawn, a brilliant, urgent piece of work by a man new to Julius. But Martinway had gone on one of his death-bouts and Julius, after lingering a moment, savouring the smell of the room, went dejectedly to store the painting in the strong-room.

It was very quiet inside the steel, shelf-lined room and Julius smoked peacefully as he touched canvas after canvas, lifted down book after book from its felt-lined nest. In his absorption he did not notice that the great door had swung shut. Until he turned to go. He pushed against it but it did not yield. His keys hung outside. A duplicate key to be used from the inside should have hung by the lock. Quite clearly Julius remembered hearing the key fall to the floor days

## DIGNITY, BE DAMNED!

before when he had been showing someone round. It must have been kicked from sight. He knelt and searched but could not find it. Irritably he pressed the button of the electric alarm and, as he did so, the light in the vault went out. He pressed the button again, waiting impatiently, but no one came to release him. He supposed that the switch was out of order, that in touching it he had broken the connection. He did not know that a power station had broken down, that the whole restaurant and street was in confusion.

Very wide awake in the darkness, he sat and considered. Foolish about the key. What was it the Bible said about treasure stored? Martinway's Bible was somewhere near. He found it by touch, took it down, handling it, then put it back, shocked by a sudden thought. If only Martinway would return. Julius lit another cigar, then cursed his stupidity. The vault was an old-fashioned one, without safety devices apart from the key and bell. A perfect death-trap. But they would be sure to come and look for him before there was any danger.

It was not until Martinway returned that anyone thought of opening the strong-room. Inside they found Julius, dead, surrounded by piles of torn manuscripts and ripped canvases, not one remaining whole on the shelves. And only Martinway could guess the thought behind the act, the agony of last knowledge.

## LIFE, BE STILL!

THE old lady loved flowers. All her life she had loved them, her love deepening to a delicate passion after the death of her father when it became quite clear to her that she would never be desired in marriage. With a tiny but safe income between her and the prickly world she had no other wish than to live alone on the edge of the village, unafraid and, once the disturbing thought of marriage was gone, free to devote herself to her flowers.

And the flowers had repaid her a thousandfold for her devotion, blooming as if to recompense her for the loss of all other delights. The tiny cottage in which she lived so primly — 'Sweetbriar', it was called, appropriately — was like a crisp fluted white shell sunk in the coralled, spangled colourfulness of a lagoon, cool and unbelievably sweet, a little, mirrored Eden emptied of all temptation. All kinds of flowers bloomed abundantly under her care so that folk would peer over the bowered white garden gate and shake their heads in wondering admiration, mumbling that she surely had the gift of the green hand, this withered, old maid daughter of a quaint old artist. And she treasured their appreciation, giving freely of her flowers so that hardly a wedding or funeral passed without adornment from her garden. So, indirectly, she felt herself of use, even necessary to the village, sealing events with her bouquets like a gentle, faithful secretary, bringing the very breath and colour of God to temper both sadness and rejoicing.

As an artist her father had not been very good. His best work in that direction had been the choosing of village and cottage for his home. As a painter his



## LIFE, BE STILL!

touch had been clumsy and sentimental, concerned with accuracy rather than feeling, and realizing neither. It is probable that he had never felt very deeply at all. He had certainly never been hungry or penniless or madly in love or angry even. Supported by an income left him by his father he had deliberately chosen art as his way of life, growing a beard to that end and spending the rest of his life thinking how well he had chosen.

It was true that he had hardly ever sold a picture, but he understood that that was the case with all fine artists and so was not disturbed. Curiously, mercifully, he had never realized how bad and dull his work really was, but even had he done so he would not have had the courage to commit suicide, or even to stop painting and confess himself misguided. He felt himself, quite sincerely, to be in particular harmony with Pissarro, but his brush left no evidence of this. Self-taught, as he would assure you deprecatingly, stroking his woolly beard and blinking behind the thick, distorting lenses of his spectacles, he had covered canvas after canvas with trees and streams and kine and nestling cottages, with an occasional shepherd and dog (shepherds could conveniently pose and watch their flocks at the same time, and so did not evince the same boredom as was evident in all other models), or a sunset, heavy, determined pieces that were somehow like crude rubber stampings, hardly first-prints of creation for they lacked the essential spirit, but more in the nature of descriptive labels for the materials of creation.

The cottage was full of his canvases; when two or more doors were opened to admit a breeze they chattered on their nails like hungry mousetraps. In the built-on studio itself they were stacked solidly against the flaking walls like tiles in a builder's yard. At his death Matilda had picked out several dozen and sent

## LIFE, BE STILL!

them to the vague friends with whom he had corresponded on art and technique, as last keepsakes. Two of these friends only had replied stiltedly and Matilda had felt that she had grievously offended them by introducing solid evidence of her father's sincerity, that they felt, somehow, that she were sending them reproachfully, damningly, a scrap of her father's skin for a pocket-book, forcing home the moral of the sow's ear. But as Matilda never heard from any of them again she was not greatly hurt.

Sensibly, Matilda had never thought that the paintings were valuable except as they represented the kindly, languid spirit of her father. In her heart she did not believe that any sustaining truth was ever revealed in the stroke of brush on canvas, at least not the kind of truth she saw in the faces of her flowers. Art seemed to her, in her simplicity, to be no more than a confusing carnival-play without warmth or particular meaning, a cooking of things which were better eaten raw. Once, in her loneliness, she had ventured to paint, too, but the result was only like a rubber stamp of a rubber stamp, an ugly, useless spit at life. She had burnt the canvas in near-anger and never tried again. Now she used the studio, as much of it as was not occupied by the canvases, as a tool and potting-shed, not irreverently, but out of sheer necessity and concern for the welfare of her plants.

Almost fanatically, as the years passed, she tended her garden, a sturdy, quick-fingered, contented old lady to whom God was just a recognizable colour among her flowers. Perfectly contented except for rare moments when she saw a villager suckling a fat baby straddled against her hip, or heard post-office gossip about love and marriage and the ways of men. Then she wondered how much she had missed. Friendly

## LIFE, BE STILL!

for a while with a neighbouring midwife, she had listened to her frank, half-humorous talk with increasing horror and thereafter discontent was no more, only a great gratitude remaining for her gift of flowers, gratitude that she had been spared the fighting uglinesses of fleshly love.

In summer the little cottage was intoxicatingly rich with blossom, both inside and out, and the hum of bees was like a faint-heard sermon on the goodness of earth. And because her love was so wide and complete, Matilda would go in the coolness of evening through the lanes and into the fields and hanging woods to gather the wild flowers to fill more bowls in the cottage and in so doing it seemed to her that she was doing exactly as God had willed her to do. Proudly, primly, she went her way, unafraid and lonely no more, brown-withered, bustling, kindly and respected.

Walking one perfect evening to a favourite hill-top for the sunset glow, anticipating the pleasure of seeing the weald neat-spread and dreaming, softly tinged as with visible love, her bent arm full of wayside blooms, Matilda came upon a most lovely wreath of honeysuckle festooned high upon a thorn bush in her hill-top hedge. Laying her other treasures carefully down she stood on tiptoe, reaching determinedly for the fragrant sprays. But she was much too short and the thorn bush was gaunt and unspringy and would not be pulled downwards even with the whole of her weight dragging on her walking-stick. Still she reached and tottered, braving the thorns recklessly, startled, suddenly, to hear voices from her own sheltered view-place beyond the hedge. Imagining villagers homeward bound, stopped for just a moment, and sure of their help in securing the honeysuckle, she burst impetuously through her own special gap.

## LIFE, BE STILL!

'I wonder if you would be so kind as to help me get some honeysuckle . . .?'

Then she stopped, staring, horrified, for this was no one that she knew, far from it! And, moreover, she could not help seeing very clearly what they were doing. Caught tightly together, their clothes shamelessly open, a young man was kissing the shut eyes of a girl, touching her soft, fine body, murmuring soft, happy, endearing words so that passion was renewed and they strained ardently together.

Matilda, speechless, blundered backwards. Hearing a voice, the young man came slowly awake, staring up at this prim little old woman, her words echoing belatedly. Then she was gone back through the gap in the hedge, to stand tremblingly, not in anger that her beloved hill-top should have been so used, but in sick horror, all the midwife's phrases crowding back upon her like vicious, squealing bats. Blindly she bent and fumbled her flowers together.

A quiet, apologetic voice behind caused her to turn. It was the young man. His face was flushed but merry and unashamed, and he smoothed back his dark hair as he spoke, and fastened a button.

'I'm so sorry. If I can help at all?'

Seeing the flowers in her hand and remembering the word honeysuckle — so long ago it seemed to both to have been uttered — he reached easily up, cutting spray after spray, offering the bunch to the petrified Matilda.

'Will that be enough?'

Matilda came indignantly awake. Fiercely she brushed the honeysuckle aside, stumping back down the lane, her heart hung among thorns as it seemed, her mouth dry and bittered as if soured by sin itself.

Alone and safe in her cottage she sat stiffly in her familiar chair, hands tight on the arms, remembering

all that she had seen. Yet, try as she might, she could not pretend that it had been ugly. The effect on her was ugly and horrifying, but the act itself had not been ugly. Frightening, certainly, the way their bodies had raced, flesh against flesh, but they had seemed strangely, triumphantly happy. Matilda could not understand it at all. Grimly, determined to understand, she hauled all her knowledge into the light. Even her own mother had named the act horrible above words, shuddering even at the memory. Dimly now Matilda saw that it must be so if one were even slightly out of tune. These two had been in complete, lovely harmony, right or wrong as it might be. Even when he had been cutting the honeysuckle Matilda had not been able to help noticing the young man's merry, happy assurance. She had never seen anything like it before, as if all the world were theirs and most of heaven too. And it might be so and all others mistaken in their blindness.

Matilda felt curiously outcast. A few scalding tears fell, and then, slowly, her sense of horror and bruisedness faded. She saw the wilting flowers on the table and hurried to find pots and water for them, wondering what would become of the honeysuckle he had cut so neatly and blithely. He would probably give it to the girl and they would laugh over it. It was not fair. It was as if this sin of flesh had suddenly become a rightness, the peak of glory and the crown of heaven. No sense in denying it for she had seen it for herself, seen clearly for the first time.

Born insidiously, she felt a tiny sense of sin move in herself, sin at having discovered them so without understanding the rightness, naturalness of what they did. After all, they knew not what they did, so the midwife had often said, adding dolorous tales of the consequences of such abandon, unmarried girls with

babes, the fathers unable to support them, mere irresponsible boys and girls. Steadily the gruff voice of the good-natured but gossipy midwife ground on in Matilda's mind.

Moving at last to make herself a cup of tea, soothed by the familiar pot and china and the smell of the cottage, her natural kindliness returned, intensified, no longer limited but world and heaven round. She felt sudden shame that she had intruded upon them, she who was old enough to be the mother of both, old enough but not wise enough. The thought rocketed through her mind and she felt a growing anxiety for the pair, almost as if she were indeed mother to one of them. Did they know what to do to avoid the terrible consequences of their passion? She thought that they could not possibly know, so young and lost and happy they had seemed; knowledge would surely have robbed them of laughter, of such free perfection.

Thinking on in this way a positive desire to help them came to Matilda. She tried to explain it to herself that it was in the nature of atonement for intrusion, for her rudeness to the young man. But the need was deeper than that. Perhaps it was, she thought again, that her intrusion had been providential, that a service was demanded of her. Beyond that point thought would not go. Right or wrong had lost their old values. She only knew quite clearly that she wanted them to be spared horrible consequences, that she wanted them to be as they had been that day always. Partly selfishness, she argued weakly; she did not want the hill-top spoiled for her by the knowledge that it had seen the beginning of great misery.

Her mind made up she went sturdily upstairs to her room, looking among her few books for one the midwife had given her off-handedly. 'Sort of thing you

## LIFE, BE STILL!

ought to know, m'dear, even though you'll never have a use for it.' She had never more than glanced at it and then only in reassuring daylight for the mere title had been alarming: *Birth Control: Theory and Practice*. The book was safely hidden from a casual glance behind the paper covers of another. Time and again she had thought that she must throw it away, that it was like a lean skeleton spoiling the peace of the room, but impulse and courage had never coincided. Now she believed that she had been prevented for a definite purpose.

Brushing a cobweb away she took the book to the window seat, scanning it hurriedly, quickly finding what she wanted: 'Preventatives in Emergency'. It was worded very exactly, brutally, in fact. They would have no difficulty in following it. Sadly unaware of the cost of such preventatives Matilda marked the page with a one-pound note from her tiny hoard and went downstairs again, wrapping the book neatly, combing back her brittle grey hair and otherwise tidying herself.

Going back through the lanes it seemed to her that the world had stood still since she passed that way before. Earth and sky were still sunset-coloured. The same birds were in the path, the same flowers nodding under the touch of the same bees. Come to the gap in the hedge she paused to whip her dwindling courage, climbing through in unhappy awareness of her age and drabness.

They were, mercifully, still there, the bunch of honeysuckle beside them. But now they were sitting upright, heads close as they watched the wine-flow from the sky washing stillingly over field and village. Matilda approached timidly, the book in her hand.

'Pardon me,' she said, then stopped confusedly.

The young man got hastily to his feet, smiling just

a little ruefully, no ready word to his lip. The girl gazed up, untroubled, pinning back her hair with a graceful gesture, and, as she did so, Matilda saw a wedding ring on her finger. Sighing thankfully, Matilda rocked to think what a blundering old fool she'd been, and the young man moved to catch her lest she fall.

Gravely, humbly, she thanked him. 'Thank you. I am quite all right now. I only wanted to apologize for my rudeness to you.'

'Please!' The young man was all kindness and embarrassment, and looked appealingly to his wife. But the girl gave him no help, saw the need for none. 'I have a feeling it is we who should apologize,' he said.

But Matilda shook her head positively. 'A lovely place, isn't it?' she said slowly.

The young man nodded wholeheartedly, the girl, too, out of her still rapture. 'Quite perfect, isn't it, John? We came here specially. You know what they say nowadays about the effect of conception in a beautiful place? We thought we'd try it. We hope it will be a boy, don't we, John? — a lovely little John. . . .'

'I hope so, too, I'm sure,' Matilda said impulsively, gladly, adding bravely, magnificently, with a feeling that never again would opportunity come for her to share such perfect, happy frankness: 'I came to ask you to have tea in my cottage, to make up for my rudeness.'



## FRAMEWORK FOR A MIRACLE

THE idea first came to the two boys as they loitered outside the tin chapel, idly hammering a warlike symphony — sounds of guns and drums and spurs and galloping hooves, they would have said — from the bent and broken railings with their iron-shod heels. They were still a little out of breath after a very brisk and devious run. There had been no real need to run for no one had seen them steal the plaster statuette from the porch of Nicola Amatuna's broken-backed shop in the High Street, but in their exuberance at success and possibly out of habit, for they were old and accomplished hands at snatch-and-run, they had accelerated to a gallop, clattering and whooping through the narrow back streets till they reached the chapel, where they felt themselves safe with only the great blind wall of the pickle factory on one side and the smelly no-man's-land of the Dump on the other. Questioned, they could always swear they'd found the statuette on the Dump; most things had been found there at one time or another, anyway, buried among the old iron and rubbish, even a dead body or two. It wasn't wise yet to go to what they liked to think was their secret den out on the Dump, for several rag-pickers were still at work.

So, jubilantly, they kicked their heels noisily against the railings of the despised and battered chapel, Joe, the elder, thin and pale and asthmatic, son of a widower and envied for his freedom, daring to hold the statuette to view under his ragged coat, where it shone like a saint in glory, although already it was smudged by his eager, grimy fingers. Gloatingly, Harold, sturdy and impetuous, main-spring of the two, capered and

## FRAMEWORK FOR A MIRACLE

whistled. For weeks they had coveted the figure, but only on this Saturday morning had every circumstance been right for the stealing. The figure was that of a young, muscular woman wrestling with a monster snake; even Nicola could not have said who it was really meant to be, apart from a shrewd guess at Eve. He had bought the mould with other junk at an auction sale, guessing that casts would sell well. And so they had, probably because the figure was naked and the idea of one so young and beautiful fighting so desperately touched the simple hearts of the surrounding slum dwellers, who themselves wrestled everlastingly with that much less tangible horror, poverty.

Not that the boys' interest was a sentimental one. In addition to its whiteness, true white being rare and desirable in their experience, they admired the figure chiefly for its severely practical hold on the snake, a hold often practised on each other and found to be stranglingly efficient. Studying the cast they wondered how the fight would end.

'She'll do it in easy enough.' Harold was quite sure.

But Joe, always solemn and sceptical, had his doubts. 'A big 'un like that 'ud make a bleedin' angel weep. Them snakes, y'know, they can creep all over like 'lectricity. Remember them motor tyres we burnt out on the Dump? just like that, creep 'n' spit 'n' bust! Seen 'em at a circus once. Proper sods.'

'Wish we could make 'em alive, just to see.' Harold pondered deeply, ripping destructively at the Mission board wired to the railings, picking at the red-printed text through the protective screen of wire netting. Startled by a word, his mind leapt brilliantly, and he pranced again.

'Jesus, Joe, blood! If we had some blood she'd come alive, wouldn't she? It's only blood makes us go.

## FRAMEWORK FOR A MIRACLE

Reckon that's what that hole in her bum's for. Look here.' Slowly he spelt out the text: 'The Blood of the Redeemer is Our Salvation. Out of the Flesh Cometh Everlasting Life!' puzzled by the words, as any straight-thinking mind would have been, wondering what the hell the blood of a pawnbroker had to do with it, but pleased, nevertheless, with the promise of creation, so that even the sluggish, less imaginative Joe was excited.

'It's an idea all right. D'you mean if we bung her up with blood she'll come alive?'

'Sure!' Harold was quite positive. 'What we got to do is knock off a good bit of meat or something from O'Ryan's. Lumme, it's jam! I read about it somewhere. They do it in China, regular. Come on!'

The statuette once more hidden under Joe's over-large coat they returned to the High Street, brazenly passing Nicola's shop, and, while Joe, in his most respectful manner, went up to the busy, straw-hatted O'Ryan and asked if he was yet in need of an errand boy, Harold, with superb assurance and rightness of manner, took up a basket of meat awaiting delivery and scudded away down the crowded street, Joe following after promising O'Ryan faithfully that he'd come again in a week's time.

United again they grinned and winked at each other. The basket was heavy, but they succeeded in cadging a lift on a grocer's tricycle most of the way. What the grocer would have said to have seen three boys riding on the already overloaded tricycle is easily imagined, but the grocer's boy didn't care. His name, curiously, was Sid Giff, and he was leaving in a week to join the Navy, although the grocer didn't know that yet, as he also did not know that Sid never left the shop without several pounds of the finest chocolate biscuits stowed

## FRAMEWORK FOR A MIRACLE

in his many pockets. Good-naturedly he shared the swag with Joe and Harold. 'Plenty more where they come from. Have some coffee beans, too, if you like; they go damned well in a catapult.' A cheerful 'So long!' and they left him waiting to hook up behind a lorry to save the long pedal uphill towards the Mount, where most of his delivery lay.

'A bit of a lad, that Sid,' Harold said, as they made for the Dump, the basket of meat slung between them. 'Wouldn't mind going in the Navy meself. What say?'

Joe shook his head out of a superior knowledge: his father had been a seaman. 'Too bloody strict. Old Sid won't get any chocolate biscuits there!'

Harold wasn't so sure. 'If there's any in the Navy, he'll have 'em!'

And then they forgot Sid, for the rag-pickers were gone from the Dump and the way to the Den was clear. The Den was little more than a deep scooped hole covered by an old motor chassis or two, quantities of old iron, linoleum, old mattresses, bill-poster's rubbish, and rusty domestic tin-ware; deep enough to stand up in and out of favour with the other faint-hearted gangs of the district because the police had visited it following a suicide in its depths. The mixture of police and suicide had been too much for them, but Joe and Harold were tougher and more sensible. If anything, the Den had become even more desirable as headquarters, and they loved to tell stories at the street corners of how they'd gone back to find blood still wet on the floor and a shiny police button in a corner. It wasn't blood, really, but some old paint spilt from a tin in the roof, and it never occurred to the gaping kids that it couldn't have been blood at all because the suicide had swallowed poison. The finding of the

## FRAMEWORK FOR A MIRACLE

police button was true enough, and Harold wore it pinned by a safety-pin under his lapel, polishing it often and ferociously so that its useful life must inevitably be short.

Safe inside the Den, Joe took the statuette from under his coat while Harold raked in the basket of meat, swearing to find more salt pork than anything else and only one really bloody piece of beef besides some liver.

'I reckon we won't muck her up, Joe. See if there's a jampot knocking about; we can pour it in then, see? Christ! I nearly forgot! We shall want a cork or something to stop it running out. Wonder how long it'll take her to come alive?'

A cracked jampot found — sound ones were worth a farthing apiece and were consequently scarce — Harold knelt earnestly, squeezing the beef over it, sweating in his anxiety to make the most of it. The beef slithered and dripped, but more blood went on the floor than in the jar. Harold swore to find it so unmanageable, finally slapping the ragged piece of beef down angrily, taking the jar into the full light, staring glumly at the inch of muddy red liquid in the bottom.

'Try the liver,' Joe suggested.

But Harold found the liver altogether beyond his control: it squelched and broke and the gain in blood was negligible.

'Sod it! What the hell we going to do now?'

Soberly they crouched, staring perplexedly at each other. A sound outside caused them to look up nervously. But it was only a vagabond dog, attracted by the meaty smell. Ferociously they pelted it with the useless joints of pork, returning to reconsider the problem. Light came first to Harold, as always.

'It wouldn't have been any good, anyway. What we

## FRAMEWORK FOR A MIRACLE

want is *hot* blood, real live stuff . . . no good filling her up with that muck, it's too dead.'

Joe nodded approvingly, admiringly. 'That's right enough. How about a drop of mine?'

'No good. That wouldn't work either. What we want is some hot girl's blood, see?'

'Bit awkward to get, ain't it?' Joe said.

'I dunno about that.' Harold rocked on his heels as if to help his brain to a solution. 'I reckon we could get one of the kids to come along. Katie Lee 'ud do. Got any biscuits left? You wait here. I'll have a cut at it, anyway.'

Intent on his mission Harold raced recklessly away across the Dump, imagining himself a high-speed car, braking and changing gear at corners, arriving in his home street, three blocks away, puffed but determined. A group of youngsters playing with an ants' nest discovered under a flag-stone told him that his mother had been looking everywhere for him, but he wasn't disturbed and scowled them down. 'Where's Katie Lee?' he demanded, and one of them told him that he'd seen her hopscotching round the corner.

'What's up, Harold?'

But Harold didn't deign to answer. Round the corner he tore, weather-eye open for his mother. 'Hey, Katie, got something to tell you.'

Katie tossed back her long fair hair, pulled up a ragged stocking and looked as if she didn't care. She was plump and pretty, though grubby. 'What?' she asked, off-handedly.

'You'll have to come to the Dump.' Harold handed over a chocolate biscuit, refusing to say any more. Quelling her clamorous friends, Katie trotted docilely, hopefully, beside Harold back to the Dump, questioning methodically but without result. Had he pinched

## FRAMEWORK FOR A MIRACLE

some more stockings for her from the sixpenny store? She still wore his garters, see! Diplomatically Harold doled out chocolate biscuits. Was it something alive or dead, black or white? But Harold wasn't to be drawn.

'Always on the bloody make, so you are,' he grumbled. 'That ain't love, nothing like it. You ought to do what I say and be glad, even if you don't like it, see?'

Katie nodded and held out her hand for more biscuits.

Joe was waiting patiently in the Den, doing nothing and thinking nothing by the look of him; he only became thoroughly alive in Harold's vigorous, yeasty company. Katie exclaimed at sight of the glowing white statuette, so intensely white in the gloom. But there was no time for rapture. Briskly Harold explained what they wanted. Katie stared in horror, a piece of chocolate biscuit half-way to her mouth. 'Oh, Harold!' she wailed sadly, then tried desperately to bolt. Joe caught and held her easily.

'Reckon we'll have to tie her up,' Harold said.

Katie began to cry and threaten all sorts of dire punishments. 'You just wait until I tell your mother.'

But they held her firmly, with an almost scientific callousness and absorption in the coming experiment. Harold found some string and tied her hands over her head to an immovable piece of motor chassis, tying her legs, too, for all her kicking and plunging.

'Where's the best place to take it from?'

Joe considered, mind wandering laboriously over the whole female structure. But it was Harold who decided that the fleshy part of the thigh would be the best place.

'Bound to be more blood where it's thickest,' he argued. 'A jam-pot full'll do it.'

## FRAMEWORK FOR A MIRACLE

Katie screamed in crack-throated despair, and Joe swore ponderously at her. 'Shut your bawling! Why, you ought to be glad you're helping us.'

But Katie wasn't glad. She screamed again, but the sound was no more than a rat-squeak across the waste. She stamped and flung herself as best she could, but Harold had tied her well. Methodically, thoughtfully, he was cleaning the blade of his penknife by ramming it aground several times; now he rubbed it lovingly upon a soft piece of stone wetted with spit. The blade made a hideous rasping like a saw through bone. Harold told Joe to clean out the jampot ready for the operation. Unhesitatingly he pulled up the leg of Katie's cotton drawers; elastic snapped, but he was not deterred. Calmly he wetted a finger and cleaned a spot for the knife. Jampot in hand ready for the flow and the statuette on the floor beside him, he knelt and pricked the pale, soft skin. Katie, surprisingly, did not kick. She only shuddered and wailed and made sudden, abundant water.

Harold rocked back in disgust. He hurried to lift the statuette out of harm's way, but in the gloom his hand miscarried. The statuette tottered sideways against a granite sett-stone and was shattered.

For a moment there was silence, horrible, intense, a moment in which murder, anything, was possible, even natural. Stutteringly Joe looked from Harold to the statuette and back again. Harold, caught by bitter emotion, stabbed his penknife again and again into the trodden muck of the floor. Fiercely he blamed Katie. Stung, she found voice and began to kick and scream again.

'Might as well let her go, I suppose,' Joe said, reasonably.

Harold nodded dejectedly, hurt by failure. Joe cut



## FRAMEWORK FOR A MIRACLE

the binding strings, and Katie bounded away up into the light, hurried by an unkind kick from Joe. Harold stared miserably at the wet patch on the floor, at the white, splintered plaster, not even interested in the curious, inside shape of the cast.

'We better go,' Joe urged prudently. 'If she gets to your Ma the fat'll be in the fire. You better get there first. See you this afternoon? How about a swim in the canal?'

Harold revived, lifted spontaneously above his disappointment. 'Good idea! And we can have a look in Barton's wood-yard for that white rat. We could get a tanner for it, easy. If we had a tanner we could go to the pictures like we did before. Your turn to go in first and pass the ticket out through the bog window. What say?'

## TWO HUNDRED BICYCLES

Two hundred sounds a lot, but you could see them every Sunday outside the church at Killduddery, propped thick against the fuchsia hedges like tired skeletons come in the hope of miracles. First Mass was not before eight-thirty, but cyclists began arriving soon after eight o'clock, some of the men still with the whiteness of shaving soap on their ears, girls with best shoes and stockings in hand, all of them hurrying, uncertain of the time, driving their bicycles desperately over the stony mountain roads.

The church overlooked the lough and the few scattered houses of the village, standing nakedly back from the road. It was perkily crenellated and plaid-windowed and looked like a jaunty cap flung aside by a frivolous mountain the night before.

On this particular June morning the fuchsia bells were swinging violently in a squally breeze. Bright sunshine followed swift, cold showers, great rounded clouds racing over the mountains, shadowing the lake like the slow lick of a cat. Whitewashed cottages stared in blank, childish astonishment from the stone-walled slopes, the smell of burning turf coming downwind like the night breath of mountain herds. New-cut turves, neat as plug tobacco, were spread in the boglands among white, waving cotton grass, and the potato plants were coming thick and good, patched like dark green corduroy in the unlikeliest places.

Soon there were a hundred bicycles against the hedge, creaking faintly together as if discussing common ailments. Their riders greeted each other breathlessly, tidying themselves hastily, the men snatching a smoke, the girls borrowing combs and begging pins.

## TWO HUNDRED BICYCLES

Several shrunken old men in musty black came riding great stallions, tethering them among the bicycles. Two ancient, rattling cars arrived, crammed and driven savagely. Boats from across the lough grounded and emptied, the shawls of the women flapping together like fighting bats.

By eight twenty-five there were fully two hundred bicycles lined thick as crane-flies after rain. The clatter of nailed boots was like hail on a roof. Eight-thirty brought sudden quietness, broken only by the few snorting late arrivals who slung their bicycles anywhere, wiped their noses and bolted inside.

It was then that young Cleg Finnigan came scare-crowding through the hedge, clacking and snapping his fingers as if he were a horse that must be driven. He had been watching from the mountain ridge above the church, waiting impatiently, hissing and sniffing and grumbling at his chilly toes as they shivered in his burst boots. He was six feet tall, rasher thin and looked a bit like a starved horse with his long, chinny face, great wet lips, meek, blinking eyes, and sandy top-knot. He was half-witted, a moon-chaser, and would laugh and weep together for days at a time and speak not a sensible word for a month under the drive of his scatty mind. He was cunning and blandly vicious too. They called him Cleg because like the fly he could cling and sting. His mother had died in giving birth to him. She had fallen from a bicycle and it was because of this that he was queer, because of this that he was apt to kick at bicycles, talk to them angrily, pleadingly.

Neighbours fed him since his father was not known. He slept anywhere and was mostly to be found in the garage yard opposite O'Flaherty's store at the market crossroads, singing to himself, sometimes sweetly,

## TWO HUNDRED BICYCLES

sometimes sourly, willing and truculent turn and turn about, able to pump petrol or mend a puncture, but unreliable, likely to unscrew important bolts without asking or water one's petrol if he happened not to like the shape of your nose. He was able to do a great many things, O'Flaherty used to say, if only you could hold his mind to a job.

Just now his mind was racing full of purpose. Inspired by a splendid full moon he had dreamed powerfully of himself riding a shining new bicycle, absolute king of the road, able to fly like a gull past hens, free to mock at the villagers as he fancied they mocked at him.

But, among all those bicycles outside the church there was no new shining one that he could take for his own. Anxiously he looked, rumbling up and down, flinging bicycles all over the road. Then, when he was sure that the bicycle of the dream was not there he spat weepily, but only for a moment, for, out of nowhere, another idea came to him. Slapping himself confidently he looked round again at the scattered bicycles, seeing a new frame here, new wheels there, a fine saddle on Paddy McGinnigan's old crock, a rousing bell on Kate Fierney's.

Briskly and systematically Cleg went to work, finding tools in a saddle bag, dismantling one bicycle for its new, right-sized frame, matching a pair of wheels, finding wide, racing handlebars, pedals, all the many new bits he wanted for perfection, kicking aside the useless parts, reassembling the new with inspired hands, all the jobbery he had ever seen in the garage yard at his finger tips, tightening nuts smoothly, even changing a tyre with masterful efficiency, humming gently to himself like a contented machine, no one coming to disturb or protest.

## TWO HUNDRED BICYCLES

Sin being rampant, the service was a long one and Cleg was polishing his new-made bicycle lovingly when the hush ended and hobnails clattered once more on the gravel. He did not think to mount and ride away; they wouldn't dare to touch him anyway; it would cost them too dearly in lost cattle and a hundred other irritating ways. Besides he wanted all the world to see the beautiful thing he had made.

For one more moment, as the first of the villagers reached the road, there was gaping, incredulous silence, then a violent shouting as they came at a gallop, fighting angry to see the wreck of so many bicycles, not at first understanding, thinking a horse or a herd must have broken loose. They even thought at first that Cleg was clearing up the mess. Until Paddy McGinnigan recognized his own new, specially imported saddle:

'Smack me dead!' he exclaimed: 'It's robbery, but me saddle's saved! Who did it, Cleggy m'boy?'

Cleg grinned proudly, holding up a clever hand to be admired: 'Me.'

'Ach, no nonsense now. Which way did he go?'

But Cleg wasn't interested. Now that the bicycle was made and the polish perfect he wanted to ride them all off the road. Impetuously he went to mount, ringing the bell for clearance, but heavy hands hauled him back, threatening murder.

'Begod and I believe 'twas the brat himself!'

'But he haven't sense enough. . . .'

'I wouldn't be saying that meself.' O'Flaherty shook his grizzled head severely: 'Many's the thing I've seen him do that I couldn't be doing meself, or you either, any of you. It's the slippery brain he has and no telling what it holds. Did you make it all yourself, Cleggy?'

Cleg nodded: 'I did. I had a dream. A big old man said I must do it. He made me promise hard.'

## TWO HUNDRED BICYCLES

'What sort of a man indeed?' demanded Kate Fierney bluntly.

Cleg tried to think, but all he could remember was a figure in a holy print.

'Just a big old one with holes in his hands,' he muttered.

Kate had nothing to say to that. A low, astonished murmur like the whistle of wings came from the crowd. And then the priest himself was there, nodding graciously as way was made for him. He came to Cleg and the new bicycle, stumbling a little over the scattered bits.

'Anything wrong?' His voice was soft as if cushioned in his plumpness.

O'Flaherty told him respectfully and the priest folded his heavy hands in amazed amusement.

'Built it by himself, without help, because he was told in a dream to do so! Well, well, isn't that a strange, miraculous thing?'

'But what's to do now, father? Here's a score or more of us with no good bikes and him with one good one.'

'A very good one, as I see,' the priest commented serenely: 'Could you take it to pieces again, Cleg, and put all the others together?'

Cleg shook his head sullenly, positively.

'Well, it would be a pity to do that anyway.' The priest considered, rubbing his double chin gently: 'It's a problem, men. The new one belongs to none of you entirely. Neither does it belong to Cleg. Yet he deserves something for having made it on such admirable instruction. It should be a great possession. How would it be now to draw lots for it, each of you, say, to contribute one shilling for Cleg's benefit — and he needs benefit well enough — and the first name out to have the bicycle? A bicycle for a shilling, what do you say?'

## TWO HUNDRED BICYCLES

There were grumblings. 'It's a fair gamble,' O'Flaherty decided for the majority and there was a great reaching in pockets and borrowing of silver. Of a sudden twenty more discovered that some small bit of their own machines had been used in the shining new one and the priest found himself with fifty shillings in hand and a list of names long as his arm. Carefully tearing the list into neat slips he folded each, borrowing O'Flaherty's bowler hat, tipping them in.

'Who's to draw now? Who better than Cleg himself?'

The priest held out the hat to Cleg and Cleg, between fear and anger, dipped a slip from among the many.

The priest read the lucky name loudly, solemnly: 'Peter Cahir. Where are you, Peter?'

Jumping excitedly, Peter scrambled his way forward, eyes popping at his luck, spitting out a new quid of tobacco recklessly. As if it were a market deal he insisted on shaking hands with the priest, and the priest, knowing his people, shook and blessed him kindly.

'The bicycle is yours, Peter. Treat it gently for it was made out of a high purpose.'

Peter mumbled his thanks, holding the bicycle as if it were a prize heifer. Cleg eyed him weepily, angrily, seeing his fine work wasted. To him the priest gave the money, deducting five shillings only for a Mass for the good of his soul. Cleg handled the coins reluctantly, thinking them poor value in exchange for the bicycle.

Defeating all argument persuasively, the priest begged them all to disperse, reminding them of cows still to be milked and the sin of idle, uncharitable talk. Slowly they went, riding and carrying the bits of their

## TWO HUNDRED BICYCLES

useless bicycles, grumbling deeply at their own bad and Peter's good luck. The priest watched them traipse disconsolately away, watched the two cars, the horses and the boats depart, till only Cleg and Peter were left.

'You must let Cleg ride the bicycle sometimes, Peter.'

'Indeed I will, father.'

'That's right,' and the priest himself went his comfortable way, leaving Cleg staring balefully at the gleeful Peter. Generously Peter wished to give Cleg the bits of his old bicycle: 'Sure with that sort of knowledge inside you, ye can make it work easy as winking.'

But Cleg didn't want it.

'Ah well, good-bye now.'

Happily Peter went to mount the new bicycle. Unfortunately he was a squat plump fellow with not much spring in him. Desperately he hopped and clambered, wailing suddenly at his wicked luck. For the bicycle was much too big for him, hopelessly big and unmanageable. Cursing he stood, near to kicking the machine, and it was then that Cleg grinned again, sidling close, offering the silver in his hand without a word.

'For the bicycle?' Peter stopped his snorting: 'How much is it? Forty-five bob! Begod and I could get a new tyre and a bit of a brake for five and be like meself again!' Besides, Peter was thirsty. He used to say that he could drink neither tea nor water and what was left but O'Flaherty's draught porter?

Swiftly he took the money, grabbing his own discarded machine, half-carrying, half-wheeling it away, leaving Cleg undisputed master of the new bicycle, proud and very full of charity for his sane and all too sober neighbours.



## BIRD IN BOTTLE

ALL these solemn anecdotes about the great J. A. C. Allbross, revealing him always as the benign genius whose shoes even the birds were proud to unlace, sound like mere paper roses and the drip of sealing wax to me. One is led to imagine all those millions of nature-loving readers, whose daily birdseed Allbross so faithfully provided over so many smiling years, prostrate, sack-clothed and wailing in their grief, while, outside the pale, the bitter, cynical few, deaf to nature's twitterings, caper triumphantly.

All being willing, I'll captain the cynics, be outcast with the best. With good reason too, for 'Jaca', all-wise and green-hearted to the simple multitude, showed no saintliness to me. (The knowledgeable few went further into natural history with the nickname, but that's by the way and not quite apt because Allbross's ears were really very small and elfin rather than flexibly massive.) Anyway, here's the crowning anecdote, straight from the bag, with hardly a whiff of brimstone.

You all know Allbross's love of beauty. Regularly he assured us of depths and subtleties, bidding us receive the manna, even as he did. Beauty is everywhere, even in a rat's tail, or where cows have been, or underneath a leaf, any leaf, anywhere. There's the famous story too, of how, in the beginning, when he was very poor, with hardly a secretary to his name, he would collect bottles and jam-jars even, not to sell, mind you, but for the simple beauties of shape and substance. Later when he made money he was still fond of bottles and jars, only they had to be Chinese, of the very best periods.

## BIRD IN BOTTLE

Goodreeve House was full of them, more than a hundred thousand pounds' worth his head gamekeeper often swore to me. Allbross used to dust them himself whenever he felt in need of spiritual refreshment, as he put it, between the writing of his daily thousand for syndication and the more serious (so they say) *Birch Broom Tales* and *Gentle Testaments*, between the essays, the prefaces, the calendars, the *Roadside Runes* and all the rest of the jolly harvestings.

He was dusting them, the pots and jars, that is, when I went to thank him that April morning for his most timely offer. The hut in which I lived had been burnt down, cause unknown and no insurance, and Allbross, with commendable neighbourliness, as I thought, had sent word that there was a gardener's cottage free if I cared to use it.

Truly grateful, I tramped through the park to Goodreeve House with my thanks. The place was neat as a sampler; spring even seemed a little astonished at being held to such a pattern. A nightingale, newly arrived, was bubbling and piping in a clipped hedge and it was as if an inventory were being read just to make sure that a bluebell hadn't vanished overnight. The house was enormous, grey and bulbous, slit-eyed and flop-eared as a herd of elephants. Fifty-two rooms as I'd heard, some of them circus-big, a staff to match, a car for every occasion (Allbross made all his celebrated rural excursions 'through field and coppice and over rolling down' with a telescope from his own round tower) and all maintained out of simple, syndicated heart-beats, nature's own pulse made audible through the pure magic of words. It must have worked out at a shilling a word at least.

Allbross, short and heavy, came to greet me, a feather whisk in his square, butcher's hand, his heavy

## BIRD IN BOTTLE

dewlaps flapping with a noise like slapped putty, his long head on one side like an egg loose in the too-small cup of his high, stiff collar, his tight-buttoned eyes blinking shrewdly behind the thick lenses of his spectacles.

'Very sorry to hear about the conflagration,' he said in that high, jerky, tape-machine voice of his: 'Anything I can do, you know. I've followed your career pretty well, I may say. You'll do well if only you'll broaden out a bit, mould your stuff on Nature's own pattern. D'you take sherry?'

And he led the way into the famous library, introducing a fragile, gentle lady working at a desk as his wife. She murmured regrets at my loss and hurried shyly away, leaving us to drink and talk. Looking back I see now that I drank and talked a lot and that Allbross did not much of either, only sat marking time as it were with his feather whisk. They were peacock's feathers and I remember how symbolically appropriate I thought them in his hands.

Full of nice thoughts about brotherhood under the skin I went presently to take over the cottage, Tom, the gamekeeper, helping very willingly, lending bits of furniture and even money to help me over immediate rocks. He was a sturdy fellow, Tom, lean and whimsical. Most evenings he produced something eatable from his sack pockets as he passed on his way home. He was there one evening, telling some quiet happening in his slow, kindly way, when Allbross came stumping up, stick rattling, his shaggy tweeds disturbing Tom's spaniel violently. Curtly he ordered Tom away on his rounds and said he'd called to see if I was indeed comfortable. We sat and talked and drank too, for, thoughtfully, he was provided with a flask of brandy in true hunting style. He'd come hunting too,

## BIRD IN BOTTLE

although I didn't realize it then. I told him of books I meant to write, of things seen and heard, opening my attic wide, and he left presently in rare good humour, promising another visit.

It wasn't until a week later that I came across one of my own experiences sentimentally written up in Allbross's column; only it had happened to him. Coincidence maybe, I thought generously, but I kept a suspicious eye on the paper and, one by one, out came my stories, pig-stuck and ruined for me.

I left the cottage in a furious hurry. I felt like taking a gun and demanding a share of the profits. But I didn't. I put up a tent beside the blackened wreck of my hut and, having settled what I would say to Allbross when next we met, I began work as best I could.

But I never did see Allbross again. A month after I had left the cottage Tom came one evening to tell me he was dead, that the nation was in mourning, wailing down the garden path, and summer dead although just begun.

I spat and Tom, unexpectedly, spat too. 'Damned good thing he's gone, the old cheesecloth (or something like it). Mistress asked me to give you this, with her compliments.'

And he gave me, in an envelope, a cheque for £200, 'to compensate for the fire'.

'But why the hell?'

'Take it easy now. It's like this. Old Allbross set fire to your place himself; he always said it was an eye-sore, spoilt the look of his boundary, and that you were a bit of a tramp anyway. He didn't want anybody else at the writing game in his district, stealing his gooseberries, you might say. I caught him at it, but he said if I let it out I'd never be good for another job of game-

## BIRD IN BOTTLE

keeping or anything else; he'd see to that. But I let the Mistress know on the quiet how it went with you and it was her idea about the cottage and the old 'un thought maybe it would be useful to have you right under his thumb after all.'

'Her idea!'

'Yes. She's all right. Reckon old Allbross only married her so's she could check up his writing for him. She's a real countrywoman, but him, well, he used to think stoats were a cross between cats and foxes and that you boiled apples to make cider. They tell me she used to write poetry under her maiden name, real spriggy stuff.'

'But how did Allbross die, what was wrong?'

'Ha, that's a really funny one, too.' Tom spat again: 'He asked for it good and proper. You know them Chinese jars of his? Well, a blue tit pops into one of 'em one morning, looking for a spot to nest, I suppose, and the little beggar couldn't get out again. The Mistress was for breaking the old jar right away, but the old 'un wasn't going to have that at all. It cost him seventy guineas you see and he wasn't going to chuck that much away for the sake of one little bird.'

'They had a rare old battle over it, but the old 'un wouldn't budge. He kept the jar in a cupboard of his desk till the tit died and then he spent days trying to hook the body out with wire and things. It went middling bad, of course, and what with sniffing up the smell and ripping his hand on the wire he gets blood-poisoning and flops like wax. Damned funny when you come to think all round it. They tell me he used to get seventy guineas for one of those chatty bits of his, just a couple of hours' work.'

I didn't find it exactly funny. But I wasn't sorry. It was all so bewilderingly right and just. Rather more

## BIRD IN BOTTLE

than a week later I went to thank Mary Allbross for her cheque.

She received me in a happy, simple little room overlooking the lake at the back of the house, one of the few rooms that seemed not to have been designed for a museum. Neither she nor the room were in mourning. She was charming, gay-witted, with poetry in her hand again, so to speak. We talked and I quickly understood that it was she who had appreciated my stuff, for she spoke names and flavours with deep feeling, free and happy, her fifty years no burden.

Sunlight entered the room boldly and the smell of many flowers and fresh-cut grass was like gentle music across one's senses. The furnishings were friendly and very comfortable with but one piece out of place. Upon a centre table, corked and ugly, a death's head of a piece, stood a pot-bellied, narrow-necked jar of a hideous bruise-colour. I guessed that it was the jar in which the tit had died and wondered at it there. She caught my glance and nodded understandingly, smiling tightly. I went closer to look, wondering at the cork, and she explained simply and easily, with the faintest touch of irony in her quiet voice:

'My husband's ashes are inside. He treasured it so, it seemed the only thing to keep them in.'

## EARLY MORNING TANTRUM

GEORGE DOVE was jumping angry. He was a big, deep-winded fellow, slow as mud as they said, and, like mud, apt to swallow things whole without overmuch disturbance. But this time the bucket held more than the well, so to speak, and George was wholly sore.

Even as he stood regarding the field of marrows from which he must cut and gather two hundred at least for a market order, according to the guv'nor's command, his anger grew to stamping pitch for somehow the peeping, bulging marrows, so cherubically bedewed, had a fleshly look reminding him all too keenly in a backhanded way of the cause of his sorrow.

Bitter thoughts whippeted across the flatlands of his mind, his scowl deepening, his ragged grey moustache twitching like a broken bird as he spat and muttered. He'd been an almighty fool to marry her in the first place, that was certain. But then a labouring man must have someone to keep house, make a bit of comfort for him, have a sup of food ready o' nights and patch the clothes that all nature contrived to tear from his back.

At first, like every new broom, she'd done him well and pleasantly enough, but lately, somehow, she'd gone cussed independent and sloven, all waspishness and discontent, like a mare that has tasted sweeter pasture. Take last night for prime example. Dead-dog tired, George had returned home from an exhausting day of potato picking to find her sleeping peacefully before a fire made from some of his best ash rods, no food in the house and no wish in her to prepare any, and a woeful unkind word too on her tongue when he roused her sharply. And, what was more, by the look of it, she'd had a pretty exhausting day herself, dressed for com-

## EARLY MORNING TANTRUM

pany as she was in a garish blue dress from which somehow one of the puff sleeves had been lost.

George, in his disgust, hadn't thought much of that until this very morning while on his way to this blasted field of pot-bellied marrows. Passing the blacksmith's shop he'd seen the corny old rogue himself wiping his eye on blue stuff the match of the dress, wiping a grin from his parsnip face with the missing sleeve itself. And knowing Jimmy Gumskill and his taking ways it wasn't hard to guess how he came by it.

Even George, with his tortoise of a mind, had no difficulty in imagining a sinful meeting in that hay-mattressed shed back of the blacksmith's shop. Thinking it over, standing there in the misty coolth of early morning, struggling to decide what he must do to settle with the pair of them, George kicked viciously at a particularly blow-cheeked marrow, smashing it utterly, the white, split flesh lying among flap-eared leaves like swans after storm. At once he noticed many more marrows gazing slyly at him, marrows with a maddening, newborn look, and in dumb, jealous confusion he kicked right and left as if it were indeed the blacksmith's plump cheeks under his iron shod toe.

Movement brought relief and he danced madly on among the marrow beds, kicking the great, delicately scribbled fruits to blazes, leaping and prancing among the vines like an ape among snakes, cursing thickly, milling right and left, doing tremendous slaughter.

Only a piercing, incredulous shout slowed George's flogging dance. It was the boss, Cust, the nurseryman, galloping in panic. He was short and thin, rhubarb veined, with sour cherry eyes and dead potatoes on his mind. Gaspingly he dragged George to a standstill:

'What the hell's wrong with 'ee, man?'

George wiped his sweating face and muttered shortly



## EARLY MORNING TANTRUM

that his wife had forgotten that he only was her husband. Cust snorted nastily:

'What's that got to do with my marrows? Besides, you must be daft to be thinking anyone would want to touch her, such a heavy old packet! Now look you here. Any more of this nonsense and you're finished. And I'm deducting three farthings for every one of them there marrows from your wage. Now get busy. I'm away to market in an hour.'

George stared gapingly at his retreating employer: 'Who'd want to be touching her anyway?...' He mouthed the phrase twice over, suddenly very hurt. Maybe she was a bit heavy, but no man had the right to fling such unkind words at him that way. Rapidly this second cause for anger exceeded the first and he lumbered irately after Cust. Boss or no boss he'd no right to insult him that way. And he hit Cust, not stylishly, but very soundly, and Cust fell among the marrows, lying very still.

George stood over him bewilderedly, honour satisfied, all anger suddenly gone. He felt very empty and alarmed. A pheasant squawked near at hand and the sound was like a harsh echo of murder. George shivered and touched Cust timidly. All right, thank God! He was only knocked flat and no strength in him anyway, except in his tongue. But hadn't he asked for every ounce of it, dropping insults easy as you'd light a pipe?

Still there was the problem of what now to do. Deep at heart George was a tidy man. Some would have left Cust to wake by himself and maybe believe a thunderbolt had floored him, but George thought it proper to shoulder him and trudge across ploughland and orchard to the house where he could be woken smoothly and comfortably with cordials and the like.

## EARLY MORNING TANTRUM

Cust's wife met George in the yard. She stared, curiously unalarmed to see her husband carried so limply upon George's broad shoulder. She was young, rich bodied and gipsy quick in eye and mind.

'Is he dead or something?' There was a certain anxiety in her voice, but whether for Cust alive or dead was not clear.

'Not at all, Ma'am. It was like this.' And George explained very laboriously and correctly from the beginning, standing there with Cust upon his shoulder.

'I see.' Cust's wife fingered her pretty nose as if to stay a tickle of laughter. 'Well, you'd better bring him in.'

Stolidly George marched after her into the long dim parlour, dumping Cust upon the horsehair covered couch, arranging him tidily.

'Very sorry, I'm sure. If you had some brandy now, Ma'am.'

'Of course.' And in a minute she was back with a bottle and two glasses, filling both, handing one thoughtfully to George.

'I am sure you can do with it.'

George could and while she poured and slapped Cust he stood solemnly by, empty glass in hand, pleasantly warmed and righteous. Cust was coming round all right and George meant to explain himself tidily and leave it to the man's common sense to see whether he had been in the wrong. After all an insult was an insult, and Cust certainly wouldn't have borne to have heard the same thing said of his own wife. Although, honestly, George admitted, no man would ever think of saying the same thing of her. Kneeling by Cust, she showed much and George could see nothing wrong anywhere, but was only conscious of vague regret that he'd no like fruit of his own.

## EARLY MORNING TANTRUM

Standing so musingly he was startled by a step in the outer flagged kitchen. Cust's wife stared up at him.

'Only me with the washing, Mrs. Cust,' a voice called, and George felt a perfect fool.

'All right, Mrs. Dove. Put it down somewhere and I'll settle with you to-morrow.'

'Thank you, Mrs. Cust. Thank you for the dress too . . . very nice, I'm sure. I suppose you haven't got the sleeve bit by any chance?'

'I'm afraid not.' Mrs. Cust was quite positive.

'Well, well, we must be grateful for small mercies I suppose. Good-day now.'

And Mrs. Dove was gone, trudging serenely homeward, thinking maybe if she cut the other sleeve off it would balance things up somewhat.

George stood very straight and still, working it all out. Then, without fuss, he helped himself to more brandy, feeling he had a perfect right to it.

'Reckon I know where that other sleeve bit is,' he commented with faint severity.

Mrs. Cust looked up at him: 'Better forget it,' she said brightly.

'I think I could if I kept me job.' George licked a bead of brandy from his drooping moustache.

'And so you shall! 'Tis all forgotten. Better go now and if ever you feel specially cold and snatched, why the brandy bottle lives on the third shelf down in the kitchen press and none more welcome than yourself.'

Mrs. Cust smiled handsomely, but it wasn't until George was back among the marrows that he saw the whole point and began to laugh. He even kicked one more marrow just for fun and life seemed to him most sweet and harmonious, the poison where it should be and only good meat in his own plump sandwich.

## A FISH FOR INNOCENCE

As the motor coach rumbled fiercely towards the coast Sam explained his ambitions to the friendly driver:

'I been wanting to catch a fish, bad, for my Ma, see? We been used to fish, good 'uns. My Dad, he used to be a fish porter and bring 'em home from market. He's dead now and my Ma's got bad eyes, skin growing over 'em. She's gone to hospital and I'm staying with Vic's Ma. That's why I want a fish, for my Ma.

'There ain't any fish round our way. Vic. and me, we've tried, ain't we, Vic? but there ain't any. We tried the canal once — a swine of a job it was too sitting on the broken glass on the wall — but we didn't catch nothing only a dead cat. We been to Highgate too, whip-behind on the back of a lorry, and we got some tiddlers, a whole lemonade bottle full. Caught 'em in a sack, didn't we, Vic? But they died quick and we couldn't get 'em out of the bottle and lost the penny on it.

'My Ma, she give me two bob before she went to hospital, and Vic, he has an idea, didn't you, Vic? We don't belong to this Sunday School lot really but Vic, he reckoned we could pay off a couple of the kids for a tanner a time and come instead: motor riding makes 'em sick, see? Take a lot of it to make us sick though, wouldn't it, Vic? And it worked!

'Old Vic, he trots up to that lanky bloke with the tickets and tells him all about it, polite-like, and he don't know what to do, it being all irregular, so he says. But Vic and me, we look like a wet week and he goes soft and tells us to get aboard just like we thought. So here we are. And please can you tell us what sort of fish we shall catch in the sea and ain't it a lovely day?'

## A FISH FOR INNOCENCE

The driver, lean and middle-aged, with children of his own, remembered how he himself had fished as a boy over tenement railings, hooking the drab clothes on the lines below with his bent pin and pretending they were fish until cuffed back to reality. A bright pair, these two — the curate hadn't stood an earthly — keen and tough and probably been up all night lifting flagstones to find worms, good luck to 'em!

He agreed that it would be a perfect day for all if only the curate wouldn't keep fluttering up and down the coach like a moth on fire: 'Just like he's expecting one of 'em to lay an egg! Fair gets on my wick!'

But he wasn't really disturbed. He stormed across a fourways, hooting a rhythmic how's-your-father, winking at Sam and Victor when a small car flinched away, piping shrilly: 'Thought it was a tool box fallen off some lorry for a minute. Now about this here fishing.'

It appeared that fishing was right up his street, that he was secretary of a minor Upper Thames fishing club and that he'd once been chauffeur to a very sporting lord, a great lad famous the world over for his exploits. Between them they'd caught everything worth catching from shrimps to sharks and in proof he shuffled some worn photographs from a wallet that was itself like a fat brown fish, pointing out the lord and himself standing in triumph before strings of enormous fish hung like washing on a line.

'Lumme, Vic, a couple of them 'ud do us a treat!'

'Not 'alf! Reckon we ought to have brought some bigger hooks though. These ain't much cop, are they, guv'nor?'

The driver examined their hooks and lines briefly and expertly: 'Not much class about them, is there?' he said frankly. 'But I know what. I'll take you on the

## A FISH FOR INNOCENCE

pier with me and we can scrounge round a bit. A bolt apiece'll do you for a sinker and there's some corks left over from the last Paladins of Temperance outing. We shall want something tasty for bait too, a nice bit of Cain-and-Abel or something to ring the bell. I caught the best fish of my life on an old bit of pork . . . like catching a steam engine on a flypaper it was too.'

Eagerly Sam produced his dinner sandwich: 'Here's the pork.'

'Plenty of time, son, plenty of time. O.K. Colonel,' this to the curate who was fussily explaining exactly where he wanted the coach parked by the sea: 'Lord lumme! Twenty miles to go and he's telling 'em not to get their feet wet already! Wants half a dozen of his own to fret about . . .' he glanced scornfully round at the willowy curate: 'But I guess that ain't possible.'

Steadily the coach drove to the sea, now diving under trees like a stoat on an irresistible scent, now seeming to suck up the winding open road as if it were milk poured for its special nourishment. All anxiousness gone with the driver's reassurance, Sam and Victor gazed in blinking wonder at so much ripeness and space. Never before had they seen such wide abundance, such grass and trees and ponds and birds and animals. Slowly the mists lifted and the sun shone as if it were remembering its own youth, urging forward the harvest labour like a beaming landlord who must now and then pause to mop his own round face with a soft white cloud.

Sam and Victor pointed excitedly to many quiet marvels and the driver grinned and explained how corn became bread, why cows like being milked and that rabbits didn't eat meat ever, not even on Sundays. Warmly inspired, the whole company sang lustily, beginning with hymns and ending shockingly. The

## A FISH FOR INNOCENCE

curate clucked weakly, smiling wanly when the driver bluntly recommended him to let the kids enjoy themselves for once:

'We're a long time dead anyway and there's plenty of time for bread and dripping when the cake's all gone.'

The first sight of the sea, sun-spangled and intensely blue, with boats riding like undressed, holiday-minded birds, made Victor shout and stamp and Sam gulp weepily, for neither had imagined such illimitable splendour, such a basinful of right fishing stuff. Victor wanted to sample everything instantly, but no thought of donkey rides, paddling or shooting galleries crossed Sam's grateful mind. Already he was estimating depths and possibilities, willing success with perfect singleness, unshaken by the merry planning of others, undisturbed by noise or colour or the circus flavour of the place. Anxiously he heard the driver explain to the harassed curate that he'd take good care of them both and off they marched triumphantly to the pier which seemed to welcome them with a broad, gold-toothed smile.

It seemed that the driver and the turnstile keeper were somehow related for a wink was sufficient to pass them all on to the pier. Victor capered jubilantly on the drumskin planking but Sam walked soberly close to the rail, hook and line and pork sandwich in hand, serenely confident that this splendid sea would yield at least one worthy fish, just one worth taking home to make up a little for the loss of his father.

The driver thought the chances fair: 'But you mustn't expect too much. A good fisherman is satisfied if he's done his level best.' But, secretly, he determined that he'd pin a fish somehow to Sam's line, even if it meant climbing to water level himself. The boy

## A FISH FOR INNOCENCE

deserved it; it would be a fitting baptismal gift, a setting of him on the right road, something he'd remember all his life.

Pleased with the idea the driver dived into a dark little cuddy-hole smelling of tarred rope and boiled oil, reappearing with two large hooks and a tangle of conger line: 'Best I can do. Bit on the big side but it saves wasting time on sprats. I reckon the best place is down the end.'

Blithely the boys took up position between two solemn, camp-stooled experts who hardly smiled when Sam insisted on baiting his hook with an ear-sized piece of pork, only puffed harder at their tin-capped pipes and hoped meanly that they'd quickly lose their ridiculous tackle or tire of inactivity. Very energetically Victor bunched upon his hook the mussels the driver had brought, refusing to spoil his sandwich, demanding to know which was the best way of killing a fish, once it was hooked: 'Clout it one, or knife it?' Gravely the driver recommended strangulation, flinging the lines far out, explaining how to distinguish between the pull of the tide and a genuine bite:

'If it's a bite, give it a chance to take hold properly, count ten, then strike and haul in.'

Sam was sure he'd manage that part all right for hadn't he been catching fish in imagination for years?

Receiving a promise that they would not stray the driver bought them each a bag of potato chips and left them, arranging to collect them in good time for the homeward journey, going not far however, but watching appreciatively where he could not be seen.

As he expected, Victor dashed off very soon to watch the paddle steamer draw alongside, leaving Sam with a line in each hand, very happy and watchful, half his mind under water, the other half sailing bliss-



## A FISH FOR INNOCENCE

fully. A good lad. He was probably wishing his Ma could see him now and wondering what was in the bags belonging to the other fishermen. Very evidently he didn't think much of them for wandering off to gossip so casually, leaving their lines unattended. Sure enough, when Victor returned, Sam sent him off again to find out just what had been caught. Victor's report, delivered bluntly and clearly, carried nearly the length of the pier:

'Not so hot! A few little 'uns and one big flat 'un. I reckon the big 'un was jammed once by the steamer to get that way.'

Sam frowned, then brightened: 'Lumme! you can't expect anything else the way they go at it, messing about, pulling in and chucking out and mothers' meetings and listening to the band and lighting their pipes. Reckon you wouldn't see a *real* fisherman doing that. P'raps real fishermen don't come here at all, not enough doing. P'raps we ought to go out in a boat?'

Victor peered perilously overside: 'Plenty of water, must be something in it.' Briskly he hauled in his line, examined his hook and rebaited it handsomely, throwing out again with a whoopee cry, thereupon ending his fishing for the day for the tail of his line was unsecured and flew snakily away. Victor swore disgustedly, then dusted his hands and grinned benignly, trotting away with easy conscience to watch the high diving and speed-boating under the pier, shouting as he went: 'Time you had a big 'un, Sam. . . .'

But Sam shook his head doubtfully, quite sure that the fish must dislike the pier standing so leggily in their water, that they must hate too the cigarette ends and bits of muck that drifted down; like someone combing their hair in your face, he thought uncomfortably. Then there were the steamers too, stirring up the

## A FISH FOR INNOCENCE

works. He grimaced philosophically. Anyway it had been a decent day. Not much fun going home again to the tenement without a fish for Ma, but he'd work hard for another day like it for them both, hawk firewood or something. But although hope was small he did not relax attention.

Watching understandingly the driver grinned to himself, remembering his own early excursions, turning once more to the tarry cuddy-hole to see just what sort of a fish he could get to attach to Sam's line. The ancient locker-keeper, an old friend, liked the idea but doubted if he could get hold of anything alive:

'There's a real nice conger that was caught this morning, now. . . .'

The driver hoped that Sam would not pay too much attention to its deadness and the locker-keeper's son was sent to monkey under the pier with a boat hook and Sam's line, the conger in a sack tied corner to corner over his shoulders. But in five minutes he was back again, grinning broadly, the conger still in the sack:

'Looks like the kid's got something on his own account. A tidy packet too. . . .'

The driver stared unbelievably, then bolted gratefully away, white coat tails flying. Didn't the devil always look after his own?

Sure enough, there was Sam, stuck into something, very cool and determined. In the beginning he had felt, miraculously, a most curious twitching and bumping on his line, like a clumsy pick-pocketing. Very exactly he had counted ten before bracing himself against a stanchion and pulling hard. At once there was considerable movement below, a large shifting and snatching and bubbling like a crate of fireworks warming up. Proudly and efficiently Sam hauled, the

## A FISH FOR INNOCENCE

line giving sluggishly. For a moment he felt sick and lonely; it had gone, it was only some old rubbish after all. Then, as he drew in the line, hope leapt again, for a sullen kind of head-shaking answered the move. There *was* something! He wished Victor was at hand to help with the hauling for it was heavy, but instead there was the coach driver at his elbow, sensibly approving. Sam begged him to find Victor: couldn't let Vic miss this lot. The driver whistled piercingly, beckoning, fingering the line inquiringly:

'Feels like a channel swimmer gone wrong somehow. Give her a good pull now, son. It's a bit of all right or I'm a door-knob! It must have been that bit of pork. . . .'

Apathetically the surrounding anglers watched. Then, when it was evident that something weighty was indeed attached, they pottered close with many suggestions which the driver waved impatiently away:

'Give the boy a chance. He knows what he's at, don't you, son?'

Sam nodded, tight-lipped and shining-eyed, imagining a beautiful, torpedo-shaped fish, splendid to look at and to eat. Steadily he pulled in, the driver helping thoughtfully:

'Funny sort of action it's got, like an elephant trying on a pair of boots,' he commented: 'Thought I knew 'em all but this is new for sure.'

One of the elderly pipe-smokers, peering overside for a glimpse of the fish, gaped suddenly, his pipe falling and drowning. He pointed with unsteady finger and the chain rail became thick with astonished onlookers.

'What the hell?'

Sam and the driver gazed together, holding tight to the quivering line. Sam shivered and guessed he'd

## A FISH FOR INNOCENCE

hooked a deep-water scarecrow. No beauty there, only a pop-eyed, bloated, spiny monstrosity which none but a cat would care to eat. Still it was a fish and big and seemed to be getting bigger every minute; it would make Ma laugh. The driver hauled strongly and tried to think of a name for it:

'Looks middling like a chinese lantern, son!'

A last heave and the great, bloated fish was lifted over the rail. It was big as a full-blown bagpipes and as ugly. Cold, blank eyes stared from bottle sockets; its dew-lapped cheeks bristled with wormy tendrils; rainbow colours flickered over its tough, mottled skin like queer, escaping memories. The needle-pointed fins and tail flapped with a clicking, old umbrella sound and the gasping suck of air through the livid gills was like a feverish, funereal stitching against time.

Victor was delighted. He touched the tight, oily skin, then jumped and bawled, wringing his hand, stung by many minute, breathing thorns.

Sam looked worried and wanted to know how ever they were going to get it home. The driver scratched his head and didn't remember having seen anything quite like it before although he'd caught some queer stuff too. He inquired if anyone there had ever caught one like it before, but no one had.

'It's a puzzle, son, a rare good start for a museum but a bit of a joke on you and me.'

Then, unexpectedly, a prim voice from the edge of the crowd identified it: 'It is what is called a carpincho, the spiny water hog . . . quite unusual. I will give you five shillings for it, my boy.'

But Sam was hardly listening. He was trying to think how they could pack it in the coach without all those kids falling on it. Lumme! what a stir it would

## A FISH FOR INNOCENCE

make back home, the sort of thing they'd never take your word for.

'Ten shillings. I would like it to stuff. . . .'

The driver winked at Sam but Sam wasn't interested anyway. Then another voice, coarse and hearty, cut across the hum:

'I'll make it a quid. It'll look real good in my shop window.' The speaker, a fat, self-made fishmonger, sniffed openly across at the finicky taxidermist.

Very annoyed, the taxidermist added five shillings, then another five, offering thirty shillings in notes to Sam. Whereupon the fishmonger, cunningly aware that coin has more charm for the young mind, rattled much silver in his palm.

'Come on, boy, forty bob!'

But Sam shook his head: 'I got to take it home to show my Ma. She don't know there's things like that about.'

Then it was that Victor, recovered from his stings, whispered foxily:

'Have a heart, Sam! Just think what we could do with two quid! 'Sides, if your Ma's eyes are bad she won't be able to *see* it. Cripes alive! you can't even *touch* it! 'Tain't no good to eat neither. Why with the money you could buy your Ma something real good and still have a packet left.'

Sam hesitated and the price rose again. He hadn't thought of it that way. Why, with all that money you could damned nearly buy new eyes! He appealed to the driver, explaining all sides:

'Close at four quid, son. It's a winner.'

Sam turned to the fishmonger but instantly the taxidermist, determined not to be publicly defeated, rapped out a bigger offer. The fishmonger searched his pockets hastily, then sighed, for he had no more money with hi 1.

## A FISH FOR INNOCENCE

'Tell you what though, if you come up to my shop I'll make it a fiver. . . .'

'Can't stop,' Sam answered him, and the taxidermist, waxen-faced and pompous, promptly handed over ninety shillings: 'My fish, I think,' he said nastily and elbowed the fishmonger and the crowd back from the still heaving fish. The driver looked at his watch.

'The sack for me if we don't hurry,' he exclaimed.

Sam held the money tightly in his pocket, running after him, calling to Victor to follow. But Victor thought it a pity to lose such a lucky hook and line. The taxidermist, in his triumph, nodded to him to take it and Victor pulled hard. There was a startling, corky pop and Sam's pork appeared intact, the fish subsiding to quarter size with a great sighing that was immediately drowned in laughter:

'You can have it, mate,' the fishmonger bawled.

Victor ducked and was gone and they were well on the way home before he explained to Sam:

'Pop! like that and down it went like a busted balloon. Talk about laugh! Thought you might want to give the bloke his money back if I told you right away. . . .'

But Sam only laughed and didn't care. He could only think of the happy wonder that would be in his mother's face when he gave her so much money, enough to repair her eyes and keep them in fish for a month.

## THE PEACH TREE

THE shadow of the Cathedral had never tired of creeping like a monstrous horned beast upon the house of the Bishop and quietly draining it of all colour and significance. It was, perhaps, its only pleasure. It might even be that the foolishly multiplied symbols of its architecture had bred in its own soul a love of the silent gesture. Perhaps the remark of a former dignitary that the house seemed to have toppled from the Cathedral bulk like a child from an elephant yet rankled, or perhaps it was simply ashamed of its Bishop and daily strove, with the sun's connivance, to hide him behind its skirts, as a mother will hide an idiot from the vulgar gaze. No one knew or really cared, saving only a charity child here and there, a blind man or so, and the under-gardener of the present Bishop, the last few thereabouts possessed of untarnished souls.

In its youth, this sprawling, crenellated, thrice-fool's-capped house of the Bishop had received a name with a double significance, irremovable except at great and unnecessary expense, since the letters were of bell-metal and formed part of the ornately massive gates long ago presented by a grateful and observant Chevalier, in recognition of the hospitality of an original bishop, enjoyed at a season when the then tender-rooted peach tree crucified against the ever warm south wall was hung with fruit of an inspiring quality. 'The Peche House' was the name he had ordered to be cast into the fabric of the gates: 'The Peach House' or 'The Fishing House', as you value the wit of a Frenchman who had himself fished on behalf of the hungry, self-styled Mother. Host and guest

## THE PEACH TREE

were dead and forgotten even by the graveyard worms, but, among other things more solid than beautiful, the peach tree of their delight remained, long-lived, it may be supposed, simply because it had learned to attend only to its own business of fruiting and to accept the care lavished upon it by several generations of Squarers — gardeners by instinct, as are all children born in haste in the shade of a yew — without wearying display or comment. Perhaps, as one lord of knowledge to another, it was grateful in its unemotional way to the Cathedral for so scrupulously avoiding the south wall with its chill shadow. Granting such knowledge it may even be that it welcomed the death that came upon it so suddenly, deeming it a more fitting end than a slow decline consequent upon a cankered heart; that it recognized and understood the urge that possessed the quiet, lacerated Gideon, and was proud to serve the poor, discredited Maid of Truth.

The day of the happening was a Wednesday in September, an Ember Day, although the fact appeared to have been overlooked by the Bishop and his cook. A birthday licence would have been their only defence had a higher authority questioned the breach, but who would grudge an aged Bishop his annual pleasure? Already the shadow of the Cathedral was clouding the plush and ormolu dining-room, unobserved, save perhaps by the white cat bunched like a chrysanthemum upon the lid of a wicker slipper vase. For the first and last time that year the Bishop had lunched to his liking and was wondering, as he sipped half an almond in the dregs of his sherry, whether Matilde — the archetype of all housekeepers — had renewed the washer of the stomach-pump, when he was raked by a jangle of voices penetrating from the usually stagnant lake of the Close. He frowned with his accustomed ease, laying a



## THE PEACH TREE

careful hand upon his pumice bright hair, over which Matilde had sprayed a little too much cologne water, gripping his ivory crucifix with unpriestly testiness — he must remind her to clean it again with lemon-juice — finally addressing a pulpit-shaped Flaxman vase: ‘Am I to have *no* peace at all? May not I share a *single* quiet moment of my birthday even with the Lord?’ (He was known among the minnows of the Church as Bishop Emphasis.) The vase, fortunately for itself, made no reply, not even when the question was repeated. The Bishop was about to rise and condemn when the clamour ceased so suddenly as to suggest an intelligent divination of his thoughts. Somewhat mollified, he relaxed, working at his long spoon-back nails with the rounded head of the crucifix, reconsidering, with an elevated pleasure, the thought that he was sharing his birthday with God. God alone knew his true worth, knew how he had laboured, often without reward, in the furtherance of the Word, and he, perhaps, appreciated God above all others. Had he not written and twice rewritten a *Life of Our Saviour for Young People*, devoting the royalties on every tenth copy to charity? Had he not also written many valuable papers on God and man (issued in a signed, limited edition under the inspired title of *At the Heels of the Universe*), a calendar in which the Saints spoke with their own authentic voices, and a monograph on the famous Peach Tree? The buhl clock upon the white marble Adam mantel-piece was reiterating the only possible comment: ‘Well done! Well done!’

Without haste — it was necessary to conserve strength to repel the ‘fevered meat’ nightmare that lately had harassed him — he poured himself another glass of sherry and sipped it in self-congratulation, blinding himself against the vision of the stomach-

## THE PEACH TREE

pump in its depths, setting it down hastily as Matilde's blurred footsteps sounded in the passage. What could she want? — it was not yet time for bolus, mâte or prayer. In a spirit of defiant assertion he shaped a rebuke, but, by an accident of circumstance, it was never perfectly pronounced.

With the merest pretence of formality, a bony hand hopped from panel to amber glass handle and Matilde entered, not with her customary rigid dignity, but hurriedly, as to suggest that one of the Cathedral gryphons had become warm-blooded and vicious and was in pursuit. Her blanched almond face was unusually angular, as if odd surfaces had been planed away, her eyes those of a martyr within sight of the piled faggots. The chatelaine at her waist was jingling like a knuckled tambourine, a dark tide seeming to race beneath the rusty silk of her bodice. For one suspended moment the Bishop recalled a Venetian 'Rape of Saint Margaret' in symbolical violet, and then irritation returned:

'Am I to have *no* peace . . .?'

'No! Yes!' Matilde's voice seemed also to have been planed. 'Something terrible has happened — the new under-gardener, he . . . he . . .' Her sense of narrative withered and her hands fluttered impotently: 'Squarer wishes to see you at once.'

'Something terrible?' The Bishop smoothed the worn gremial he wore always about the house and peered into his sherry glass as if seeking support. 'Very well, show him in.' His sigh was one of sober resignation.

Braced in the doorway, Matilde hauled on an invisible line and Squarer, dark and huge, born underground one would say, came into sight, bare-headed, ox-eyes frosted, shirt sleeves rolled high above arms

## THE PEACH TREE

that were like red-brick urns. An embroidered, light-framed 'Hope' twisted sideways upon the wall, as if with curiosity, as he advanced. He was followed by a limping, worn-looking man of about thirty with thin hands and face and deep, bright washed eyes. Trotting behind, like a terrier about stallions, came Anadoin, the Bishop's secretary, a flimsy creature with tortured hair, fingering his stock, and bubbling importantly, as always. Both Squarer and the under-gardener were grimed and sweating, the first with emotion, the second as a result of recent labour connected with the saw that Squarer carried before him as carefully as if it were red hot. In his free hand Squarer held a single ripe peach. Panting heavily, lifting his feet high, as if caught by a rising tide, he advanced to the table edge, heavy head bowed, fierily conscious of his unworthiness:

'Terrible sorry to disturb you, m'lord.' He seemed to feel the need to scratch himself in several places at once, but a glance at peach and saw was sufficient to subdue the flesh. 'A serious matter.' The secretary nodded as if erasing something with his indiarubber chin and deftly shrouded a dish of Charlotte Russe with a napkin. 'I was working among the roses — blight's fallen thorough as snow this year — when I heard the ripping of a saw way over by the south wall. Knowing no reason for such I crossed by way of the Avenue, and there was him' — the saw quivered indignantly as he directed it at the quiet man — 'there was him, I say' — he spat out the words like a succession of pips — 'sawing away at the Peach Tree! It crunched flat as I shouted. He'd slit the leather sleeves and mashed every speck of fruit except just this one.' He laid the peach before the Bishop, dislodged a rose petal, picked it up, apologized, and not knowing what else to do with it, tucked it into his waistcoat pocket. 'I

## THE PEACH TREE

don't know what's to be done. I think he must be daft, m'lord.'

'The Peach Tree destroyed!' The world tottered, righted itself. The Bishop picked up the peach, smelt it and stared at his secretary: 'Destroyed?'

'Yes, m'lord.' The stock might have been a halter about the neck of the secretary. He smiled, frowned, and bending low, hissed like an affronted owl: 'I think he must be mad.'

As the Bishop turned to the quiet man, Squarer and Anadoin nodded a duet.

'You! — what is your name?'

'Gideon — John,' prompted the secretary.

'Be quiet!' The Bishop's nose quivered angrily and again he addressed the quiet man: 'Your name, what is it?'

'Gideon — John.' It might have been a soft echo of the secretary's utterance. Staring in a puzzled way at decanter and almond- and grape-strewn tazza, its owner looped his hands into his belt, covering and stroking the regimental badge pinned to the oil-smooth leather.

'John Gideon! Ha, yes, I remember you now. You were employed as a soldier, were you not?' Nodding solemnly, careful not to disturb his stomach, the Bishop stared at the heavy-booted feet, shapeless cord trousers, khaki shirt and yellow-haired, oddly disturbing head, remembering very well the catechism he had prepared months before, the hour spent in deliberation; his decision, arrived at only after medical testimony had been offered, that a lame man would be more efficient as gardener than one with only one eye and shell-shocked nerves. 'I remember you very well,' he repeated slowly. 'You live up to your name, then, at the expense of your liberty? Are you mad?'

'I? Mad?' Gideon looked from one to the other in

## THE PEACH TREE

smiling astonishment. 'Mad?' He felt in his pocket as if for an answer and shook his head: 'I've never met anybody who really knew what madness was. Some say one thing, some another. I once heard a clever man say that only the so-called mad were perfectly sane — that they only had the courage to live their thoughts. Our Jesus was thought to be mad in His time, you know.' His voice was gentle, as that of one who corrects children.

The Bishop reddened as if he had absorbed colour from the carpet. He pointed and the secretary pounced upon a Levant morocco-bound dictionary, licked his fingers and stirred the pages: 'Mad — adjective,' he read in a measured pulpit voice: 'Out of one's mind; insane — in brackets — of person or conduct — end of bracket; wildly foolish, excited, infatuated, furious, violent. . . .'

'Not very definite, is it?' Gideon seemed almost sorry that it was not.

'Definite enough for the perfectly sane,' sobbed the secretary.

'You forget yourself, Gideon.' The Bishop mourned the absence of wig and gown, weighing the peach as if about to throw it: 'You forget that you stand convicted of a *crime*, that *madness* was suggested as an excuse for your action. If you are *not* mad — and I am by no means *convinced* that you are not — what explanation have you to offer?'

For a full minute Gideon made no reply. He was gazing at a seventeenth-century Indian painting of a hero slaying a dragon, smiling with warm delight. He did not resent Squarer's arm-thrust and muttered command. 'Well?' The Bishop's patience had almost seeped away. Turning slowly, Gideon stared thoughtfully, as a child might at an ape in uniform.

## THE PEACH TREE

'Speak up, man!' threatened Squarer.

'Speak up!' shrilled the secretary.

'Speak up?' Gideon seemed undecided. He turned his back resolutely upon the painting, advanced a step, glimpsed the peach in the Bishop's palm and nodded with sudden weariness: 'I suppose you have a right to know. It happened out there. . . .'

'Out where?' The words might have been dipped in gall.

'In France. I was out there three years. It happened in March, the month of the Retreat. The battalion, all that was left of it, was holding a hook-nose bit of line ten miles east of Peronne. I was servant to an officer, a Captain, an old-fashioned man. He'd been up at Headquarters most of the day. There was a whisper going the rounds that the Germans were massing all along the line. Our raiding parties had ticked off nine different units where they'd found only one before. I was waiting for the Captain down in that badger hole, drying a change of clothes for him, hoping for a thread of news. . . .'

'But what has all this rigmarole to do with . . . ?'

Bishop, secretary and gardener were staring hard at Gideon, convinced of his madness, but he brushed them from mind and went on in a thinly urgent voice:

'I'm coming to that. I'd been writing a letter to the wife of a dead man, faking his thoughts and handwriting so that his child, back home, should be well born before his wife suffered the news of his passing. The Captain had agreed to delay the official Field Message. I'd nothing left to be doing except ink in the flowers on a faded bit of wallpaper. Better that than just thinking. It was quiet down there, although the guns were coughing as usual. When you've lived in sound of gunfire for a year or so you don't notice it

## THE PEACH TREE

unless you empty your head and listen carefully. The sound of water dripping from the waterproof sheet under the roof and the chlorinated water giggling in the saucepan seemed ten times as loud. I'd a touch of fever. A clot of mud beyond the brazier seemed to be running alive; it reminded me of a wound that wouldn't heal. I couldn't get the idea out of my head. I covered it up, but it didn't make any difference. I could still see it. You've never seen anemones blooming through the basket of a breast? — or stamped upon a rat that was feeding on a clot of brain? — or heard a man pray night after night that he might become like his officer in manner so that he could get a better job when the war was over? No? . . . then you won't understand — you've no right to sit in judgment . . . not that that really matters. . . .

'It was past midnight when water slopped into the tunnel and the Captain coughed his way through the smoke. He was tired out, looked as though he'd been shaved, hands as well. Perhaps he knew he wouldn't last the night. He gulped whisky from the bottle and gave me his last order. His car had been bombed by a Taube and he'd borrowed a horse from an old Madame still living in a crumpled bag of a château a few miles behind. I was to take the horse back at once:

"She may need it before morning," he said, and my question was answered. The horse was stone blind, but had known the road all its life. There was no need to waste time over directions.

'I shall never forget the way that horse ambled back along that miserable road. It had some sense that was much better than eyes. It might have been born to war for all the notice it took of gunfire or police; if a lorry ploughed by it simply stood at attention, jogging on again when the road was clear, never risking the

## THE PEACH TREE

pot-holes repaired with planks. Everything except just the soul of the horse seemed stretched to its utmost that night. Right at the bottom of my head was a queer sucking feeling that hasn't gone yet. There was the usual flicker all round as if someone were hammering red-hot nails into the rim of a barrel; the same green flares spurting, hanging and blinking out like mouldy stars; the same deep grumble thumping up, but none of the night sounds a countryman expects. It was like riding through a picture that was being manufactured by machinery. Staring ahead, I thought of the change that would have come had everyone been blinded at once. I could imagine men groping about, enemies no longer. They would have begun to think for themselves, seen war for what it really was. . . .

'It must have been about three o'clock when the horse turned off the road and up a horseshoe drive, snorting its satisfaction, a cheerful sound in those parts. It stopped before the château, a great ragged grey moth of a place that seemed to be waiting for burial, and I slid down. There wasn't a shred of light to be seen. I blundered around, rattling the shutters, returning to find the horse gone. I was a bit scared, was just dove-tailing a new banshee-tale when I heard a voice, soft as a strip of velvet: "I thank M'sieu Tommee." I couldn't see anybody, but I knew the devil wasn't given to politeness. I mumbled some sort of a reply and the shutter of a dark lantern slid open about an inch. I followed this poor wedge of light up some steps broad as tables, through a door and into a room about twenty feet high, with cracked walls and ceiling, a gilt and marble room I discovered when the shutter slid quite back, the only sort of room in which swords wouldn't seem out of place. I saw Madame then. She was small and thin, not a starved thinness, but the sort that goes



## THE PEACH TREE

with lace gloves. She was wearing dark silk, with a French officer's jacket thrown over her shoulders — her husband's or son's, it must have been — and sabots on her feet. It made me realize in a new raw way what the war meant to France, meant to us all, the sight of those great sabots on tiny feet. "I thank M'sieu Tommee," she repeated, smiling a little . . . she could still smile, though not with her eyes. From a queer cut-glass cupboard she brought wine and offered it with a bird-like dip of the head. I sipped a little and made her understand that a German advance was not improbable. "The Bosche!" was all she said and there was no hatred in her voice, only scorn and the seeds of every kind of disgust. I felt as though I'd spoken of pigs to a Queen. It would have been an insult to say more. I think I saluted and turned to go and at the door she came after me and put into my hand a strange thing, a full ripe peach nested in cotton wool. I had to pinch it to make certain that it was real, wondering all the time how she came by it at such a season. The door closed with a little stutter and then I had to be giving my mind to the pot-holes. From the plantation I pulled a sapling and went on, pushing this ahead like a plough, holding the peach carefully, wishing my senses were as keen as those of the horse.

'It wasn't exactly wise to go dreaming along in the way that I did. The road had begun to smell unfamiliar, and a lost feeling to bubble at the back of my head when I heard about a dozen tremendous explosions all along the line. I bounced back quickly enough. That was the beginning. In under a minute, just as rain spits and then pours, so did that bombardment quicken. It wasn't the usual performance, not the usual short-lived gallop, but a trampling that worked up the scale until the earth was heaving like a solid sea. There was no

## THE PEACH TREE

longer any need of the sapling. It was as though a circular saw of flame were breaking through the earth, dividing it; fields, road, prongs of trees, everything glistened like a new ripped wound. The very stars seemed to hop back in horror. Here and there, one after another, great furnace mouths gaped as magazines exploded. The air scorched the lungs, was flung all ways with a strange numbing force. Heavy stuff was breaking over the road, scooping out the ears, screening mile after mile with whining splinters. I kept on spitting, I don't know why. I ran towards a lorry humped by the roadside. The driver was working at the engine, cursing, his face quivering like a pressed balloon, his teeth seeming to be loose in his mouth. I spoke to him and he replied, but neither knew what the other had said. He went on with his tinkering while I looked inside the lorry. It was empty. Bits of iron were buzzing and ripping through the tilt like crazed bees returning to a stripped hive. I galloped on down the road towards a heap of bricks, thinking to take cover, and the driver came running after me, arms flapping like bits of wings, but I never knew what he wanted for a shell rumbled into the road and burst almost on top of him. A scrap of bleeding flesh slapped me in the face, and flakes of steel laced into my knees and stomach, crippling me. When the muck stopped falling I managed to crawl back to the hole. All I could see of the driver was a stumpy hand and wrist, poking up out of a reeking pudding crust of earth — nothing more. I sat back and stared, astonished to find that I still held the peach. Sprawled there by the side of that open hand it seemed to me that it was asking for something, a feeling that grew and grew as my stomach emptied. I laid my watch in the palm, but it didn't want that, so I took it back. I looked at the peach, lifted it from its nest and

## THE PEACH TREE

placed it carefully, and the fingers closed, as if satisfied, squashing the peach so that it oozed and dripped. I shall never forget . . . it seemed to add a full stop to everything. I stared and retched, and presently knew that the hand had meant to drive home a truth by its action, but what that truth was I couldn't be sure. I scoured my brain, pressed the cotton wool to my stomach — it saved my life, they said — seeming to sink deeper and deeper into the mire, the hand following behind, appealing. . . .

'A thin light was breaking when I awoke, a March mist skeining away like dust rubbed from a granary window. A perfect morning in heaven, but not on earth, thanks to man. It was almost as though God were unaware of all that was happening. The hand was still poking from that greenish crust, stiff as if it were wired and stuffed. The flesh of the peach was rusting. The gunfire hadn't lessened in force. All the world in sight was a sick and spewing waste. Great fans of earth and water were spouting one after another, muck rattling down incessantly. Machine guns never ceased to clatter. It was as though thousands of rattles were being swung to clear an area of crows, only there were no crows, no birds of any kind, no flies even, nothing living except a roadful of retreating men, mules and guns, twisting like a worm over salt, men worn away to quickflesh, their eyes staring, reddened at the rims, men who coughed and coughed with a dry, torn-paper sound, mud to the waist, most of them, their equipment dangling, clinging like crabs and limpets to dead men . . . some marching only by a concerted effort, like a headless beetle, men who could have told you the exact worth of everything in the world — God, love, church, home — if they had only thought it worth while. They might have been mechanical soldiers, emptied out of an

## THE PEACH TREE

old toy box, except that they bled and bled until the road was stained. A gun limber jolted over the feet of one, but he didn't cry out or his expression change, only crawled to the roadside and stared. Another was carrying a mole in a brass birdcage, talking to it, thinking maybe that it was the only one left in all the world. A few were singing loudly, drunkenly, to hide their feelings. You could smell death as it will never be smelt again unless all men are willing, unless the lesson was lost. It was as though your nostrils, eyes and mouth were smeared with bile. You could finger the very bowels of life and laugh at the thought that gain could come out of such a bloody waste. . . .

'Sometimes I think that was what the hand wanted to tell me, that sound fruit must not be used as manure, that right and wrong were only words, that men were worth just as much as they valued others, but I can't be sure. I must make certain — *must!* I feel that it meant something that is everything. I think and think until my brain bleeds, finding nothing solid. I only need a foothold, but they are all rotten. What kind of a church is it that permits war? I ask myself. Are not all religions rooted in the same God, the same faith, for all their outward frills, or is the name used only for its advertising worth? Wasn't the war proof of the fake, of the worthlessness, as instructors, of paid ministers, proof that each man must be a God unto himself before he can approach the full light of understanding? You can't manufacture Gods, or love, or faith, except by example, and what example have we seen of the institution that professes the care of souls? — two arms of the same body scourging each other, spending the souls in their charge as carelessly as any gambler! Where was the power for universal good that they boast in the name of God? How God Himself must have wept. . . .

## THE PEACH TREE

'The hand knew all this and much more, knew that I was ripe for understanding, was urging me to pass on the knowledge, pave the way. But I have failed. The flame dies, people forget, refuse to listen to me. Every time I see a peach, the body from which they come, I am reminded of my failure. I must destroy them all, and when none are left, then, perhaps, will the whole meaning come to me. Sometimes I think that only in destroying what you desire may you reach understanding. The peach was a symbol — sweet flesh, a rough stone, an untasted kernel, the bitter seed . . . Always is the truth bitter. It's not something you can stir into your tea and forget.'

Gideon ceased to speak. All colour had left the room and with it warmth. The white cat awoke, shivered and crept from sight. The shadow of the Cathedral was upon them all. Gideon seemed to feel it, made an effort to shake it off, flinching as he sighted the hand of the Bishop. As if obeying some irresistible impulse, the plump, well-kept fingers had closed on the peach, crushing it, even as had the hand of the buried soldier.

'So! You have understood!' There was a new keenness, the throb of hope in Gideon's voice. 'The other hand was just as yours is. Its knowledge is shared by you — you will tell me, tell us all?' His body trembled like a suddenly filled vase.

With a single movement secretary and gardener turned from him to the Bishop, hopeful, too, like children before a sealed box. The eyes of the Bishop were closed, his lips curved into a thin smile, as if he were gazing on a morning-fresh landscape. The secretary lifted the juice-moist hand with an apologetic: 'Your pardon, m'lord,' placing a handkerchief beneath, dusting his hands together as he stepped back, prepared for a magnificent sequel.

## THE PEACH TREE

'If you know, tell us, quickly, I beg you.' A sunset glow seemed to be mirrored in Gideon's eyes. His thin hands were working desperately, as if he were scratching words upon stone.

Three times he begged for enlightenment, but the Bishop made no sign, did not cease to smile. Oddly enough, he was dead.

## T W E N T Y - O N E T O - D A Y

I WAS looking for a small green potato of a mountain lake that evening when three tyres punctured together. The high lonely road was rocky as any lake bottom but even so such wholesale damage was hardly to be expected. I got out grumblingly and the cause was plain enough. Bits of black, broken bottle glass were all over the road. It was evening, but I was in no desperate hurry. I cleared the glass and got to work, hoping someone might pass who could direct me to the illusive lake.

The lake itself was described officially as a mere gnathfang, which meant, apparently, a wrinkled three-penny-piece, and was known more understandably as Tom Cassidy's bit of water. It was reported to be teeming with half-pound trout to equal in size that you could use them for weights and never be more than a quarter-ounce out. Logically it couldn't be more than a mile from where I was, but I could see no sign of it; nothing but rocky, heathered slopes with rare, twisted hawthorns like spurting misery itself and, in the valleys, darkly sliced boglands with a despairing scribble of cotton grass through the rushy green.

High on the mountain sheep grazed like shabby bits of cloud somehow broken from the piled masses in the sky. Red cattle waited at a barred gap in a stone-walled plot reclaimed from the humpy waste, and, near by, like a bleached shell on a ledge, was a whitewashed cottage capped with rope-tied thatch. It was from this cottage that a man came hurrying after a while. I could hear his heavy boots clinking on the rock as he came sure-footedly downhill. I straightened to greet him. He was tall and gaunt, knotted and lined like scrubbed oak, his clothes amazingly patched and weathered.

## TWENTY-ONE TO-DAY

'In trouble?' he asked.

I explained about the broken bottle.

"Tis the sheep do rake them from cover," he said apologetically: 'Is it Rathbellamy ye're making for? I'm worried, y'see. It's my daughter Nora. She's twenty-one to-day. She's been to the racing at Marygo. I was lucky there meself once and we was hoping the same for her. If ye're going to town ye might inquire. If she's had a winning day there'll be plenty striving to hinder her with their windy talk and tenpenny wine. She's a fine girl. It's a dowry she's after making and me not able to with the times so bad. I gave her all I'd got to be trying her luck.'

I nodded wonderingly, telling about the lake and camping and fishing.

'Well now, ye're very welcome. I'm Cassidy. It's a fine, trouty bit of water, just up and over where ye'd never be finding it unless ye knew. I used to fish it meself once, but the work piles up. I'll have time again maybe if Nora has the luck.'

It seemed little enough to offer to run him down to Rathbellamy, but he hadn't the time with the milking still to be done. But if I'd go for him he'd be very grateful.

'Ye know how 'tis when ye're young. Time smells different. Maybe ye're thinking 'tis a queer, chancy way to be making a fortune quick? So 'tis, but it happened to me. Only time I ever went racing. Long time ago now, but some of the old lads still call me King of the Gamble.'

I still had one more tyre to repair and I encouraged him to talk, although it was little encouragement he needed to tell of his one great day.

'Well now, if ye really want to know, it was like this,' and he flapped with his big bony hands as if kneading



## TWENTY-ONE TO-DAY

the words with them: 'I was twenty-one and a great mind to be marrying, but with little enough to start things off, if ye understand me. A grand girl she was, with shiny red hair and pride in her walk, but her folk were driving her to marry a tight little moneyed dealing man from the town and she not knowing how to choose.

'So, y'see, I had to be improving meself somehow, so's to stand level with the other bouncy lad. I had to do something quick. I thought I hadn't had much luck so far so it was time I went chasing luck meself. I felt lucky, if ye understand me. I was twenty-one to come and on the very day I reckoned I'd have luck working hard for me.

'The racing was the only way I could see to make a lot quick. I had to be making a bit to start the betting so I worked all night poaching an ass-car full of salmon, bold as ye like where they'd never been poached before. I could feel the luck working so I went at it brazen, selling the lot away for good money in the morning.

'Then I went walking down to the racing at Marygo. I was so sure I didn't even trouble meself to look the runners over. I didn't have to with the lucky knowledge I had. I just bet the whole of me pocket on a horse priced at twenty-to-one in the first race, and it won like boiling ginger. Then I moved up among the big-money lads and slapped the lot on another horse called Cass-Cassidy; a name like that was better than a wink to me. It won sweet and easy, though an unlikely horse ye never did see.

'I had trouble getting the whole of me money and missed the next race, but the luck was still there, for it was a dead-heat and no pay to it at all. Old Judge Heron from Mountdoyle saw me stripping the book-maker that time and stopped to scratch his ear. I was owing him money for cattle and I paid him up right

away, telling him about Kathy and the way the luck was working. He said to keep with him and they'd pay up quick, and what did the luck feel like — was it a shout or a whisper in me mind? — but I could only be telling him to have a go on Sockeye Third in the next.

'He was a real sporting lad and he bet the equal of me and when it won and we'd collected I told him about the salmon I'd crimped to start the ball and how much did I owe him? They were *his* salmon, y'see, but he only swore a bit and laughed and said what about the next? I said Runic Red for that and he didn't waste time asking why. I thought the name meant a colour something like my Kathy's hair, but it didn't matter a damn, for that one won too.

'We went through the card like that till the last race and then the Judge looked at me very thoughtful. He'd a horse of his own running in that but I hadn't an idea about it. Anyway, I thought the luck was about run out. But the Judge said it wasn't gentlemanly to walk out. Must have a bet even though the bookies weren't very willing. I didn't know what the hell to do so I asked a bookmaker what horse he'd like us to bet on. He told us Ropy Roisterer, the worst thing on the card if ye were going by pedigree. The Judge scratched his ear some more and thought we could afford to lose anyway, so we bet heavy.

'“If it wins,” the Judge said, “I'll be rearing goats in future and you can have my horse right away. Ride him home, work him with the plough. No good using judgment in the face of luck.”

'Ropy won all right. We had to wait for our money while they tipped spirit into the bookmaker, and then the Judge gave me his horse and a couple of pannier bags to hold the shirtful of money I had. I didn't wait any more, only rode away home like ten days' rain,

wishing the luck to hold and Kathy promised to me before night.

'They lived down by the lough beyond the town, she and her skimpy folk, but it looked like the luck had run out, for the dealing man was there fixing to marry like ye'd buy a cow, and no more to say. I said me say though, telling them the fortune I had and them only sniffing at the way I'd made it and it no worse than any man's dealing. I got a bit mad at the sniffing and no more care left in me, and I whipped the horse with the money-bags still hanging on him into the lough, to sink or swim as he fancied, and off home with me, wishing 'em to hell and beyond, all except Kathy.

'But the luck was still there and me not knowing, for that dolly-boy of a dealing man couldn't stand to think of a good horse and money going under. He went swimming after it, but the old horse knocked him cold and he was dead when they pulled him out. Kathy must've seen the grabber he was then and made up her own mind. She came riding the horse home here to me the next day. She'd found him half-way up the mountain after a night of looking. She stayed too, although she's gone now of a sickness and only Nora left. So ye see why I'm worrying. . . .'

I saw well enough and reassured him amply. I was in a bit of a hurry to see Nora myself by then, learn the tale of the day's racing. I said I'd be fetching her back in no time at all and then maybe we could have a go at those trout together. I left him watching from the crown of the road as I rolled away downhill to Rathbellamy, a shine in his face and his great hands looking through his pockets as if he were bringing happiness to light once more.

The town itself was just one wide, melancholy street with a bleached backbone of a railway line looping close

## TWENTY-ONE TO-DAY

and sheering crossly away again. It was still light in the sky but there was a greyness on the place, a swelling gloom left over from all the nights that had gone before. Every other shop seemed to be a porterhouse and I chose one with the name Shon Nolan painted across its windows. Outlined in timid lamplight the letters were like empty faces, a spidery wreckage and a warning against liquor. But I wanted a drink just the same, a drink, news of Nora and a quick return to the mountain.

Hardware and groceries were stacked solidly inside the shop, leaving a short bar on which a fat, sad man leaned heavily, reading a crumpled, out-of-date newspaper. He looked over his bent and rusty spectacles at me, stood upright sighingly and tipped his greasy bowler hat, but whether in politeness or pain I could not tell. I asked for whisky and wished him to drink with me. Dubiously he accepted, drank gulpingly and then said flatly:

'I'm overstocked as it is, if ye're selling anything.'

I said I was not, although I thought that poison could certainly be used thereabouts, and I mentioned Tom Cassidy and Nora too and where would I be finding her after the racing.

'Tom Cassidy is it, the king of the gamble?' He refilled my glass almost sympathetically, looking at me much as a doctor looks at a new patient: 'On me this time. It wasn't a broken bottle that delayed the car be any chance? Well, well, ye weren't to know, but 'twas himself busted the bottle to be stopping someone to talk to. As for his daughter Nora, 'tis fifteen years since she was twenty-one and gone racing and no one knowing where she is. Same again, or d'ye need a double?'

## THE BLACK ANGEL

WE used to live up in the hills in those days, in an old bleached skull of a farmhouse miles from anywhere. My father farmed sheep on a large and profitable scale. My mother hated the loneliness of the place, although she never complained.

I had two brothers and a sister and one of the reasons for living so high was for the sake of my brother Royal, who suffered from a wasting disease which seemed without name or cure. Hill-top air and abundant country food would help him better than anything else, they said, and whether or no, it certainly helped the rest of us.

Doctor Hisko used to come once a week to see Royal. He'd make the day of it too and sensibly so, for it was a long journey. At first he drove the nine miles in a spring-cart with a huge leather Mother Hubbard drop-boot against the weather and then, on one memorable day, he came in an amazing horseless carriage, grinding and smoking up the hill, his plump red face blown with anxiety. Our eyes popped and we ran to see, Royal watching from his window, the Doctor waving us frantically out of his path. Cursing and sweating, he pulled up in the cobbled yard, a queer, brand-new smell of petrol and burnt oil adding to our excitement.

Breathlessly we questioned. The Doctor said it was from America, a birthday present from his brother, who'd had a hand in the making. We pawed all over it, burning our fingers a bit, then ran in to tell Royal of the miracle. A horseless carriage, self-contained and capable of anything! Royal's eyes shone. We made him put an extra coat on against the chill that was always in him, and stood with him at the open window,

## THE BLACK ANGEL

gazing and jumping with joyous expectation. It was the biggest thing that had ever happened. The queer little carriage, spidery, with big shining brass lamp eyes and tight, white-lipped wheels, was like something out of a fairy-tale, a substantial impossibility.

Four times in all the Doctor came in his Columbia Mark VIII, as it was called. On the fourth occasion he could not start it when it was time for homing, even though he swore and tinkered for two solid hours. Finally he gave it up and my father, amused, offered to harness our own cob to it, give it the necessary extra horse-power. But the Doctor was positively finished with the black ugly devil of a thing. Vehemently he scrubbed the grease from his hands — they'd not been really clean since he possessed it — quite forgetting the odd streaks on his full, weathered face.

'It's the cob and the trap too I'll be having.'

'And what about your bottled horses?' my father inquired.

'Begob and the boys can have it for a plaything!'

He meant it too. He washed his hands of it entirely, in more senses than one.

We were jubilant, Royal especially. My mother was dubious, but my father reassured her:

'It's just dead metal and they'll have fun pushing it around.'

We did, too, although Royal insisted that it was wrong to push a thing that could be made to go under its own heart-beat. A day or so later, my mother and father gone safely to market and only the easy-going Mary and Joanna in charge of us when they had time to spare from the kitchen and dairy, we pushed the Mark VIII round to the porch on the sunny south side where Royal could examine it. He said he thought he could make it go, but we hadn't any faith at all. It was

## THE BLACK ANGEL

fun enough just shoving it around, pretending to drive. But we had got used to giving in to Royal. We watched him fiddling for an hour, taking bits to pieces and putting them together again. There was an amazing collection of tools under the box seat and he used them all in turn, very sure and absorbed. He was always reading and we thought him top-heavy with a little knowledge. Steve and I left him alone with it, finally, to go and drive wandering sheep back up the hill.

Galloping and bawling, we were suddenly astonished to hear a first-class explosion and a humming and throbbing followed by Royal's thin, exultant voice. We thought for a moment that the machine had burst and he was hurt, but the whippy throb went confidently on.

'My God! He's got it started!'

We forgot the sheep, racing back, and there was Royal, driving round and round the cobbled yard, proud and shining, little Ruth skipping behind, clapping and chanting one of her ceremonial poems. Jubilantly we clambered on, Royal driving us round fully fifty times. Then he stopped, hoarse with excitement, yet calm too.

'We'll take it out on the road. It's an angel, a lovely black angel, and not a devil at all like old Hisko said.'

It was altogether too good a chance to miss. It might never happen again. We did stop long enough to get an extra coat for Royal, then away we hummed and popped, Ruth and all, holding tightly on as the carriage swayed and bumped out of the yard. Joanna called wildly after us, foreseeing death and disaster, but we did not stop. Not even my father could have stopped Royal then.

Out in the road he concentrated on a change of gear, lips pursed, his thin, white face puckered and deter-

## THE BLACK ANGEL

mined. In those minutes we recognized greatness in him. He *knew*, right off, more than we would ever know. He'd read to the bone all those books and papers the Doctor was always bringing for him. He couldn't fail. With hardly a grumble the gear slipped in and we gathered speed. We cheered, holding on breathlessly. One more change and we were racing along at fully fifteen miles an hour, Royal alert for any change of tune or smell.

It was marvellous, unforgettable, a magic carpet come true. Downhill we tore. It seemed like a hundred, a thousand miles an hour, and our brains spun the wildest, shrillest poetry. Only Royal was quiet and intent, master of more than poetry, love for the machine shining through as if he'd made the flesh and bone of it himself.

The horseless carriage didn't seem like the stuff of this earth at all. It was like a hurrying, friendly creature noisily determined to give us joy, a creature magnificently impossible, chewing beauty for nourishment. We glimpsed and were ready for new life, new distances, lame and tied no longer. Anything was suddenly possible.

I can remember it all now, clearly as if it were sun-printed on my mind, the sparkling clear spring day, with fat, bottle-nosed clouds, the shining blackness of paint, the big brass oil lamps, the white rubber tyres, the steering-wheel itself, little brother to the road wheels, guiding them with friendly concern over ruts and pot-holes, the smell of petrol and oil and grease, hot and new and exciting, an Arabian Nights breath, wings for all, no dream impossible.

We hardly felt the bumps as we clattered down Old Purgatory Hill, past the lonely signpost and up Little Purgatory. Sheep bolted away from us in great, heav-



## THE BLACK ANGEL

ing leaps, and jackdaws wheeled away like something scorched by the sight of us. We slowed by the dewpond on Gaylord Tump, coughing and sputtering to a standstill.

We saw clearly once more. I was trembling at the knees and my hands were stiff from their grip upon the rail. Royal looked worried. He poked here and there, tightening things, oiling and spitting on his fingers to ease the pain of contact with hot metal. We brought water a drop at a time in our cupped hands for the radiator and Royal dipped into petrol and oil, calculating deeply, careless of spreading grease. He thought we should be getting back. I cranked fiercely and after a minute the engine coughed and wheezed into life. We climbed on once more. Ruth was singing to herself, low and bubbling, Steve was grinning all over, and Royal was silent, intent and very happy. For myself I had a taste of copper in the mouth and a feeling that nothing could ever hurt me again.

That ride home was like a swift dream shared by every tiny bit of us. We loved each other and Royal most of all, and the polished brasswork seemed to grin and wink back at us, sharing too and promising much. We bumped and bounced and swerved. The three sheepdogs came rushing and barking. Joanna was weeping on Mary's broad shoulder at the gate. We rolled grandly past, right up to the door, and tumbled off, all except Royal. He stepped tiredly down, patted the machine gratefully and said he would like some hot milk, please.

He died a week later without ever leaving the house again or seeing the Mark VIII. But he was happy, I swear. He'd flown, and whatever happened he was safe. They wheeled the Mark VIII aside to make way for the funeral coaches.

## THE BLACK ANGEL

Weeks afterwards we went to look at it, Steve and I. We polished the brasswork and then, slowly, laboriously, we pushed it to the top of Old Purgatory and sent it rolling and crashing down into the gully. We didn't attempt to start or drive it. Royal would have understood why. My father watched us from the brow, and we walked home together, hand in hand and in silence, bravely as we could.

## CRACK OF WHIPS

MUTTERING angrily at the crawling progress of a hawker in his path, his bleak, thin-lipped gipsy face rippling in a kind of agony under his smart bowler hat, Squaler Adams swung his circus-painted van out of the Whitechapel Road between high, dingy walls into Swan and Abbot Yard. Children skipped before him, abusing him aggressively for destroying a grotto of dirt and stones and flowers built on a manhole cover exactly in the middle of the yard, but he hardly noticed them, stopping tumultuously outside the shabby, balconied tavern from which the yard drew its name. Dogs barked inside the van as it stopped but a rapping word from Squaler quietened them. Lighting a new cigarette from a draggled butt he stiff-stepped to the door and the publican, fat, bald as nothing and timid under his merriness, looked up from his betting slips with jocular surprise:

‘Well, well, if it ain’t Squaler himself! Welcome, m’boy!’

‘Mister Adams to you,’ Squaler said with vicious distinctness.

‘All right, all right! But ain’t I your friend?’

‘Friend?’ Squaler forked his fingers derisively: ‘I ain’t got any and I don’t need any.’

To hell with you then, the publican thought, but he did not say so. ‘Well, I’m sorry you feel that way about it,’ he sighed. ‘Here, have a drink.’ He beckoned Squaler into the sour-pickled bar-room: ‘What’s the almighty trouble?’ he asked cautiously, glad that somebody had knocked Squaler at last: ‘What’s gone wrong with your schedule? Thought you were booked for a northern circuit. Squaler Adams and His World-

## CRACK OF WHIPS

Famous Troupe of Performing Poodles . . . saw it in the gossip meself.'

The publican poured again and spat clumsily, surprised at his own daring, hating Squaler but afraid of him, too, consoling himself with the thought that he brought good profitable custom to the house. Astonishing how much he could drink and it all went to his eyes so that they seemed to float in pure gin, cold, bright and hard like poisonous crystals.

Fully aware of all that the publican was thinking Squaler drank gulpingly, spitefully amused, cunningly enslaving him with an off-handed explanation: 'I want that yard of yours for a week or two, private, see? Couple of falls broke back stage in a damned fourpenny joint: killed Six and Seven, two of my best. Busted my show. Someone done it on purpose.'

'Terrible bad luck, Mister Adams.' (God help 'em, whoever it was!)

'But worse for them,' Squaler sneered, and a gold tooth glimmered like a shot in waiting: 'The management wouldn't listen when I talked compensation. Maybe they wish they had now, the bastards!' Smoothly he pulled a newspaper — a smudgy country sheet — from his pocket, spreading it on the puddled counter: 'Act o' God in a manner of speaking,' he jeered and drank again.

Gapingly the publican read of a disastrous fire which had occurred, cause unknown, two dead, in an up-country theatre and he stuck his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets and scratched nervously to ease a creeping of flesh: 'Jesus wept!' he muttered, and thought how he'd take perishing good care to keep on the right side of such a knife-minded cove.

Satisfied with the publican's expression, Squaler lit another cigarette, poking the smoking butt into a con-

## CRACK OF WHIPS

venient knot-hole as if to show how simple it was to start fire: 'Is Jimmy the Dose about?'

'Not right handy.' The publican trod upon the cigarette end with difficulty and eyed a fly-specked clock-face: 'He'll be in Mike's pool-room for sure.'

'Get one of those brats to take these to him then.' Reaching across the mahogany Squaler pulled two fluffy white paper chrysanthemums from a vase: 'Two more for Squaler Adams. He'll know all about it.' He added a shilling as compensation for the messenger, but the publican, smirking appreciatively, foxily substituted a halfpenny on his way to the door (just to pay for the flowers), calling with windy authority, sending an urchin running. When he returned Squaler was gazing at an advertisement for whisky in which a dancing girl leaned seductively, his left eye half-closed against the fume of his cigarette.

'You ought to get one like that for the good of the house,' he said.

'Yes, Mister Adams.'

'You'd be able to sell much worse gin than this and no one would notice it. I want that room facing the yard and something to eat as soon as I've parked the van and the dogs, understand?'

The publican nodded, one eye on the clock: 'D'you happen to know anything for the two-thirty?' he asked with pathetic hope.

'Red Label'll make it,' Squaler snapped and turned into the yard and the publican scribbled gratefully. The lists completed and dispatched, his thought skated uneasily. Just like something out of a nightmare this Squaler was for all his smart, tight-fitting clothes, bow ties and thin-soled, pointed yellow boots. A Chinese Judas, that's what he was! But he knew something about training dogs. They did what he wanted them

## CRACK OF WHIPS

to; they just had to else that whip of his flicked the life out of 'em! Ah, well. He sighed and spat wholeheartedly, very glad that he was not a poodle in Squaler's string, lumbering into the kitchen to bully-drive his humming tub of a wife, send her skipping for some of that salt fish Squaler was so fond of.

Out in the yard the tawdry-painted van buzzed and backed, roaring through the gateway into the inner yard as if it too had been well-trained by Squaler, children scattering noisily, assembling in the gateway in curiosity, clutching handbills snatched from the van, unafraid of Squaler and hopeful of entertainment. But Squaler slammed the gate upon them before loosing his poodles from the kennel boxes in the van. At a word the seven dogs ceased in their wanderings, grouping together at the foot of the high brick wall, pathetically alert, gazing patiently, hungrily, determined to understand, to avoid punishment. Squaler brought a stinking lump of beef and a bag of coarse biscuits and sprung the blade of his knife, calling the dogs to him one by one: 'Here, One!' examining mouth, ears and paws, feeding it meat and sending it back to its place against the wall with a biscuit to be eaten at ease: 'Here, Two!'

The meat distributed without the need for punishment he lifted the kennel boxes from the van, clearing a space of pub-litter and ranging them against the wall as they were numbered, ordering the dogs into them, using his fist cruelly when Eight, puzzled by the missing pair, entered Number Six. Filling a pan with water from a wall-tap he ordered them to drink, again by numbers, forcing obedience with a whip. Back again to the boxes and then, as they were called, they must take their places in line for a circus-trot upon their hind legs, bowing in time with the threatening whip.

But the yard was breathless, full of sour furnac

## CRACK OF WHIPS

heats. Summer hung over the city like a suffocating depth of blue wool. The rumbling of traffic, women's voices, cross-stitched in gossip, the foot-race of heavy-shod children about a barrel-organ, a tapping from the cobbler's shop in a corner of the yard; all came thickly, sluggishly, as if sound itself were oppressed. More children stood under a line of newly-watered window boxes, poised in strange cactus shapes, mouths open to catch the drips, a frieze symbolizing the need of the world and its everlasting dependence upon an off-handed power on high.

Soon Squaler wanted to drink again and the dogs were ordered to their boxes. Whip in hand he entered the Swan and Abbot by a side door, nodding to the book-makers and their shabby runners accounting at the bar. The publican grunted gleefully, excitedly, whispering good news: 'Red Label won all right.'

'The tip's worth a quart then, gin, man, gin, not hop water.'

The publican regretted his enthusiasm: 'Jimmy the Dose has got the goods and will bring 'em along after dark.'

'Good!' Squaler tapped a fat shoulder with the grease-smooth handle of his whip: 'The best gin, mind.'

Alone in a musty, broken-ceilinged room dreary with many spotted mirrors, with ragged-curtained windows overlooking the inner yard, Squaler hung his coat and collar upon a dusty stag horn and sat down to eat and drink, still wearing his bowler hat and with his feet mounted on the sofa bed. While he ate he read an old newspaper methodically from page to page, news, advertisements, every inch, finally picking his broken teeth with a split match. Sweeping a space clear on the table he took an old pack of cards from his pocket, jerked them free of a red silk garter and shuffled them

## CRACK OF WHIPS

for a game of solitaire, playing without change of expression even as he had read the newspaper, a cigarette drooping and smoking like the wick of a short-lived soul. Occasionally his hand reached for his glass but his eyes did not lift from the cards for more than the moment necessary to drink.

The dogs in the yard under the window made no sound. Sometimes a pot rattled in the kitchen as if protesting against greater heat. Pedlars bawled in the outer yard, offering and selling the most unlikely articles. Towards six o'clock the tide of sound from the main road increased as factory workers scattered homewards, dwindling again, then beginning on a new, brisker note two hours later when the workers, refreshed and smartened, emerged in search of amusement. Mothers called their children to bed and the children hooted dismally, pleading the folly of bed while light remained.

At dusk Jimmy the Dose, tall and dignified, sauntered into Swan and Abbot Yard, a trembling white poodle under each arm. Stolen two days before from a west-end district the two animals sadly missed the freedom and luxury to which they had been accustomed. But Jimmy didn't care. He couldn't afford to be sympathetic. He'd bought them cheap and meant to sell them dear like any other trader. Squaler would soon alter their looks so that even the kissing duchess who'd lately owned 'em wouldn't recognize 'em. A bit of luck having two right ones in stock else it would have meant hunting for a pair which would have been awkward with most of the gentry out of town.

Being in the dog business was very instructive one way and another to a man of a humorously philosophical turn of mind. Pick up a finicky, scented, gold-collared pup of some squinting, fancy breed and you



got a good idea of what the owner was like; that led to amiable speculation between the so-called high and low, to a mental switching of persons and the birth of conclusions neither pompous nor ludicrous but certainly of a kind unforeseen by Marx or his later gossellers. Jimmy, well but curiously educated, had become a receiver of stolen dogs out of sheer amusing necessity. The business, linking two worlds, kept his mind intelligently alive and moreover, he loved the good-natured Tower Hamlets better than the gilded, false-crusted west. He looked forward to and attended dog shows in a spirit of gleeful inquiry and was often mistaken for a peer, although it pleased him better, on other ground, to be mistaken for a successful bookmaker.

Once inside the Swan and Abbot Jimmy bundled the two poodles under one arm, tipped his derby to the company and asked for water, cold, pure and lovely for the bowels. Accustomed to such a request, knowing that the water would be paid for at a champagne rate, the publican filled a glass and jerked a thumb towards a door in an angle of a passage. Refreshed and happy at the prospect of profit Jimmy barked and howled merrily outside the door before entering but his humour was wasted on the gloomy Squaler who merely nodded and looked critically at the poodles.

'Not bad,' he grumbled and Jimmy gaped and echoed him indignantly.

'Not bad! Lord love us! D'you know where they came from?' His long, plump face puckered haughtily; he sniffed delicately, stroked back an imaginary ringlet of hair and peered quizzingly through a key-ring: 'Have you no better quality parchment, young man? And I would like a monk to illuminate the pedigree for me. . . .'

But Squaler wasn't amused: 'How much?'

## CRACK OF WHIPS

'Twenty quid.'

From a thin twist of notes Squaler counted out ten.

Jimmy re-counted them: 'You only want one dog?' he asked innocently although the price was adequate for the two, he having prudently, on principle, asked twice as much as he was prepared to accept.

'Have a drink,' Squaler grunted and turned again to examination of the poodles.

'But I said twenty,' Jimmy wailed realistically, pathetically: 'Dammit there's a reward of a tenner offered for 'em.'

But Squaler did not seem to hear. He had gripped the two poodles by their muzzles, forcing their gaze, breathing frightening spurts of smoke into their eyes. Looking at him Jimmy felt suddenly very empty and unsafe as if he were standing on sucking sponge and he was glad to break his rule and drink and forget the question of price. Tough luck on the dogs but they'd get used to it. Perhaps someone or something would take an equal crack at Squaler one fine day, balance things up, although it would need more pluck than Jimmy felt that he himself possessed. An ugly, spider-minded devil. Always a bad sign when a man drank so much alone. With a curt 'So long', Jimmy went away, hand tight on the notes in his pocket as if he were afraid that Squaler would come snatching with those gin-soaked eyes of his.

Alone again Squaler grinned evilly to himself and lit the two gas jets, standing one of the shrinking, frightened poodles upon the table among the food and cards, talking steadily to it in a queer, thready voice, cigarette bobbing menacingly, stopping sometimes to rap out its new name of Six, clipping and trimming its fashionable tufts to match the rest of his troupe, finally stencilling six irregular patches upon its shaven body

## CRACK OF WHIPS

with gipsy-ink, cuffing it brutally when it backed and wriggled, planting it helplessly high on a tall bamboo stand while he worked on the second dog. The transformation complete, Seven marked with seven patches and clipped to a new smartness, Squaler dumped them through the window into the yard, climbing after them with his whip. The light cast through the open window might have been a furnace mouth so frenziedly did the dogs seek to avoid it. Squaler called to them and they cringed and raced but the whip caught up with them, snapping and biting cruelly so that they were glad to creep from sight into the kennel boxes assigned to them. Scenting newcomers the rest of the troupe whined and fidgeted, but a word, which was like a small echo of the whip, was sufficient to quell them.

Dropping the doors of the boxes Squaler climbed back through the window, drinking and waiting. After a few minutes the two poodles yapped miserably and at once he reached out, snaking the whip terrifyingly over their boxes. Silence, and then they dared to bark again in their loneliness and once more the lash hissed and cracked. But still they did not understand; foolishly they scratched and whined in miserable chorus. But this time Squaler did not use the whip. Hopping through the window he silently grabbed the poodles one after the other, muzzling them tightly so that any sort of sound was impossible.

Returning through the window he gulped the last of the gin, kicked off his boots and lay back on the narrow, creaking sofa, watching the flies on the blotched ceiling unwinkingly, presently dozing, then sleeping, the gas jets hissing over him like watchful, guardian snakeheads.

Waking late to the tap of the publican's wife on the door Squaler stretched and spat and reached for a

## CRACK OF WHIPS

cigarette, calling curtly to her to enter. She did so, her loose slippers slurring as if phrasing her contempt, bringing newspapers, salt fried fish and thick, gritty coffee, pursing her fat purple lips as she turned out the gas jets and raked together the stubs scattered over floor and table, gathering up empty glass and bottle and leaving the room without a word. No sense in wishing a bad smell good morning she muttered to herself in the passage and went sniffing back to her kitchen. But Squaler had hardly noticed her. Morosely he picked up a newspaper, reading, smoking, and drinking the bitter coffee, munching sugar between gulps, tossing fish and bread into the yard for the later benefit of his dogs.

Already the sun was riding high, flooding an unrefreshed world with new, scorching heat. Good beach-milking weather. Squaler cursed at the bad luck that kept him training when he might have been earning easy money along the coast, skinning the holiday crowds. No sense in carrying on with only seven dogs though since they were used to working in a pack of nine. Quicker to train two new dogs than to teach the old ones new places.

Gruntingly he found his boots and pulled them on, not bothering to lace them, taking up his hat and whip, climbing through the window. Seven of the dogs moved and shook themselves in their boxes and Squaler released them methodically. But Six and Seven were crouched sadly. Briskly Squaler unstrapped the muzzles, talking bitingly, naming the dogs often, forcing attention with his fist, bundling them out to join the wandering troupe, recalling them after a minute, singling them out with the whip, cracking it about them so that the tip of the lash just seared them, the dust of the yard rising gustily as if in horror. They

## CRACK OF WHIPS

tried to join the remaining watchful seven, but the whip formed an angry, living fence, a cage almost in which they were trapped. They howled mournfully and nosed each other, puzzled by the faint, scented smell of each other, by a memory of comfort which would not fit with this new slashing voice and whip. Then, when they were near to hysteria Squaler unexpectedly gave them meat, effacing detail from their minds, leaving only broad fear of the whip and the beginning of understanding that they must obey.

Meat to all the troupe and then Squaler leaned and smoked, grimly amused that the seven old stagers were contemptuous of the newcomers even though their sex was inviting. So well had he trained them, implanted his own attitude of mind. Watching, he heard a sound from the near gate and saw that it was ajar, saw a red head peeping between. A lightning jerk of the wrist and he had sent the whistling lash within an inch of the inquisitive, upturned nose and the boy jerked back in alarm, squawking indignantly.

'Hi! What d'yer think you're playing at?'

Squaler grinned maliciously: 'Get to hell out of here!'

'Aw, guvnor, have a heart. Lemme watch you training 'em. I'll sit pretty, God's honour.'

A foot hammered impatiently at the door. Squaler swore threateningly. The boy grumbled and went away and Squaler set to work, strapping Six and Seven in strange harness, controlling their movements by leading strings, cracking his whip cruelly when they dragged and jibbed. Simple movements at first, which, even when performed successfully, earned no reward except brief respite. Squaler didn't believe in payment for results when he could make 'em hop without. They improved. Squaler brought out a step ladder, calling

## CRACK OF WHIPS

one of the older dogs, ordering it by a crack of the whip and a sign to climb the ladder, to pause, bark three times, naming itself, and somersault away. He led Six to the ladder, cracking his whip about its reluctant haunches. It mounted one step; again the whip; two steps and then suddenly it scrambled out of control for a second whip had begun to crack in the outer yard, loudly and confusingly so that the dogs were bewildered.

Furiously Squaler wrenched open the gate. The red-headed boy was cracking an improvised whip gleefully. Squaler pounced, intending to snatch the whip and punish the boy but the boy evaded him easily, flourishing the whip and belching impertinently as he ran away. Defeated, Squaler returned, slamming the door, cracking his own whip to restore order, bruising dog after dog until they were obedient and in line. But no sooner did he begin again than a second whip cracked in opposition, then another, for Redhead had quickly proved to others the peculiar joys of whip-cracking. The dogs were puzzled and unmanageable. Squaler opened the door, lacing his own whip among the running children. But they were too quick for him. Jeeringly they raced before him and dared to strike back.

Angrily Squaler returned once more to the inner yard. The publican brought him gin and sympathized profusely, regretting that there was nothing *he* could do to stop the nuisance: 'You know what kids are. You'd have done the same thing yourself once (and a bloody sight worse!). If you was to promise 'em a show, later on . . . needn't keep your promise, of course.'

But Squaler saw no sense in compromise: 'If I catch 'em. . . .'

## CRACK OF WHIPS

Viciously he attempted to force the poodles to obey his own whip and voice only, but the cross-cracking from the outer yard increased steadily and the dogs blundered confusedly. More and more children found sticks and cords, cracking lashes in merry competition until Swan and Abbot Yard echoed thornily.

Accustomed as the tenants of the yard were to noises of various kinds and healthily amused by the present exhibition, no one but Squaler objected. Helplessly he drank and raged. If only he could lay hands on Redhead... Cunningly he presently kennelled the dogs and opened the door of the inner yard slightly, waiting within easy reach. Sure enough the boy came and peered unsuspectingly inside. Instantly Squaler caught him, dragging him inside, spinning him across the yard, kicking the door shut and standing before it, picking up his whip, slashing at the reeling boy so that bloody weals appeared on the healthy pink of his cheeks. The boy shrieked and cowered under the whip, running blindly, yelping loudly for assistance.

At once the many whips ceased to crack. There was a bumping and muttering and appeals to 'Give us a bunk up here, Bert', heads appearing over the wall, hands placed carefully among the broken glass topping. Redhead bawled again and they climbed higher, dropping over the wall. More children shoved against the door, forcing it open, sending Squaler sprawling, two dozen angry children prancing excitedly. Licking his bleeding lips Redhead pointed to Squaler and they crowded upon him, slashing and kicking.

'You dirty bastard, you!'

Overwhelmed, Squaler pounded with the butt of his whip but the whip was promptly dragged from his hands. He kicked and punched but the children were too many. He staggered and fell under their united

## CRACK OF WHIPS

hammering and Redhead, assuming command, shrilled an order:

‘Hold him down!’

Obediently the children, boys of all ages with several lusty girls among them, dragged strongly at Squaler’s limbs so that he was stretched flat, kneeling heavily so that all his strength was useless.

‘Quick! Hold the gate, two of you!’

For the publican was coming, not too quickly, with one or two others, alarmed by the uproar.

‘Now!’ Redhead spat briskly: ‘Hold his fist, you!’ He fingered the weals tenderly and spat again, this time upon Squaler: ‘Fond of the whip, ain’t you? Time you knew better. We ain’t dogs and you ain’t God, see? Hold hard!’ Very deliberately he stamped twice upon Squaler’s wrist with all his weight, his iron-shod boots breaking bone easily. Squaler moaned in startled agony, writhing helplessly. But the boy was merciless. A careful poising above the second wrist and his boot came crashing, smashing.

Then, at a word, the children jumped up, diving triumphantly through gate and yard into the merry freedom of the street.



## EGG IN ROAD

BOTH women saw the egg at precisely the same moment. Both stared as if in doubt whether it were a pebble, heads askew, clumsy-booted feet tapping, the one pausing in her march to the communal well with dinted bucket, the other swinging a dripping, seaweed-weighted basket undecidedly. Realization came to them in the same breath, and they cantered forward at almost equal speed, their red flannel skirts and rusty black shawls pocketing the wind so that they seemed to sail together like two privateers into collision.

Curiously enough the egg, a large and splendid duck's egg, lay exactly in the middle of the road, a little distance beyond the last houses of the village, glowing like a pearl in an old pewter setting, a certain mark for the hooves or wheels of the first ass-car that should chance to pass. Fortunately there was little traffic through Quinspray, and unless someone (God help 'em so in such uncharitable weather!) should be driving for kelp from the shore a gaunt mile away, kelp to be warming the toes of potatoes with its rotting; or be thinking to pick a creel of turf away up in the back-rock bog, the egg might well have been safe for days. All of which, however, is reckoning without the natural greed of a hungry, melancholy, and defiant people to whom an egg is a meal and a half, and a prayer to Himself for encouraging eggs in such a bleak rat-tail of a place full fifty miles from the hope of salvation and but one from a treacherous sea whose kiss alone, as they truly say who know it best, is crippling.

Once, in the springtime of its people, the village had fished a good living from the sea upon whose lip it sat, but boats and bones had been smashed more often than

they could be replaced, and the will to struggle against the power of steam which foreigners employed in their fishing had dwindled until none were left with a true sea-twist in 'em, or the knowledge to be building a currach or stringing a net beneath the horizon where the great shoals run. Small blame to them, let it be said, since the children of twice-widowed women, sucking fear and bitterness in their milk, cannot fail to lack the pure resolve of the first-born. Lobster pots only were now made and set, each man cultivating osiers enough for the purpose in his marshy patch between deep-trenched potatoes, storing his luck in monster baskets sunken on the edge of the tide until the coming of the Frenchmen in their tidy clippers when the fish were sold for a mighty curse and a few pence apiece.

A painful life it was with only tobacco and potato spirit and legendary tales and hopes to stay the men, and for the women, the sturdy, fighting women, the doubtful pleasures of gossip and quarrel to divert their minds from the pains of pregnancy, the expending of the scant profits resulting from the knitting of coarse stockings, and the snatching of such gifts as were scattered by the winds of chance, gifts hard and soft, large and small; doles from American relatives and scraps of relief from local squireens following a feudal custom; now the finding of a broken-legged wild goat kid, ripe for the pot, now a haul of candle wax or better from the beach; a crock of honey from a wild bees' nest; maybe game birds found dead and broken at the base of Finn's Light after storm; an egg even. . . .

Delia Vantalligan, long in leg and quick of hand so that ye'd swear she'd pegged it with a circus half her days, was the first to reach and secure the egg. Bending magpie-fashion she picked it up, lovingly brushing a

speck of dirt from its green-white perfection, nesting it safely among the carrageen moss in her basket, thinking how she'd swallow it with a breath of whisky and be rewarded for her labours on the shore, triumphantly scraping back a grey forelock under the hood of her shawl, eyeing the indignant Nora O'Banion with abundant scorn:

'Why do ye hurry so that ye'd near be breaking your neck, O'Banion?' she inquired blandly.

'Hurry indeed!' The O'Banion gulped and rattled her bucket angrily: 'Why shouldn't I be hurrying and ye after stealing an egg from meself.'

'Stealing, did ye say?' Vantalligan hawked and stiffened, her sharp nose reddening, her thin lips chopping briskly together: 'Why, me grand conniving creature, wasn't the egg a gift to meself from a friend beyond, and it happening to slip from me basket as I hurried along?'

'A gift! and ye without a friend this side o' Galway jail on account of your galling, skincey temper, the way ye'd be reflecting the moon in a glass to be saving a candle. Arrah now, bottle your lying and be giving the egg where it belongs, for wasn't it dropped by me own sweet duck who did choose the softness of the road to the hardness of the forecourt. Dead it is now by the knife, and it's woeful I am to be thinking it had the power of making such grand eggs.'

'Duck! Since when have the O'Banions had anything but the power to be insulting their neighbours?' Vantalligan laughed snortingly to cover a momentary confusion, but she wasn't one to be deceived by such hawse-hole talk: 'Get thee home, woman, and say it's a bat ye're after killing!'

Stung into speechlessness the O'Banion dropped her bucket, stamping to her cottage, reappearing with a

## EGG IN ROAD

sadly bedraggled bird in her hands, a bird that might have died in flood and earthquake by its unhappy appearance. Ramming the dead and bloody corpse under Vantalligan's nose she hopped and demanded: 'What would this be then, ye old toad-trot! but the very duck, brought by O'Banion himself from beyond the hill?'

'Since when have dead and stolen birds laid eggs?' Vantalligan, recovered from surprise, sniffed and hummed sarcastically.

'Stolen? It must be the rags on your back and the breath in your miserable body ye are meaning!' The O'Banion seemed likely to drown in her rage, but she drew breath in time, and wiped the sweat from her face with the tail of her shawl, glaring fixedly at Vantalligan, determined not to be bested: 'But I'll not be arguing with such filthiness,' she sputtered. 'Give me the egg now, and be off to your hole before the wrath of Himself descends upon ye like a torrent of boiling lead.'

Clumsily she lunged towards the basket, but the duck in her hand hampered her, and Vantalligan skipped nimbly away, running a few steps and hanging the basket high upon an eaves-pole, returning like an affronted crow, fists working, her sallow face spotted and twisted as if splashed with caustic. Fiercely she snatched at the broad shoulders of O'Banion, wrenching her shawl so that it trailed like a symbol of departed honour, crowing over the patched and ragged bodice revealed.

'Bitch!' she shrilled, and then tottered as her own shawl was dragged from her.

'Common-box yourself!' The O'Banion skipped and gyrated, employing the duck as a weapon, punching lustily, feet kicking deftly at Vantalligan's bony

ankles after the manner of old-time wrestlers. Came a screech like the bursting of the hinges of hell, and laughter to match; a groan agonizing enough to have addled an egg less thick-shelled than that of a duck, and then a united howling sounded, dirging high and low as if celebrating the death of life and the beginning of the torments of seven thousand years. O ye prodigals, support me with dragon's fire and Omega's salt! Here was no faltering. All petty animosities merged into a single powerful spite. Vantalligan's wire-muscled blows steadily bruised the thick flesh of the O'Banion, O'Banion herself swinging the duck and pounding away like a steam thresher at her opponent's legs. Shawls were trodden into the mire of the road, and feathers whirled high. Hair was dragged painfully and watching birds thought how well the tangles would do for binding wind-loosened nests. Spouting tears made the aiming of blows a little uncertain, but there was no failing in energy. Speech became incoherent, great sobs bursting spasmodically from the pair.

At the first sound of assault neighbours had come running, questioning each other enthusiastically. Old folk who never now left the chimney corner came hobbling and blinking, renewing vigour in the scene, mumbling encouragement with quaint passion. Children were dispatched for the husbands of the combatants and a wise man collected the several shotguns in the village, and hid them away; they couldn't afford to have a killing with the turf-cutting so near at hand.

Dancing and shouting together the villagers grouped themselves close, some gambling on the outcome, blasphemously approving: 'Dance, dance, ye old roses! Nothing like a hag's-gallop to clear the blood!' Several meek-minded ones made an attempt to reason with and

separate the fighting pair, and were severely kicked for their pains. Gulls screamed overhead as with sympathetic understanding. A pony, perhaps scenting blood, began a crazy race round and round its enclosure, neighing and snorting fiercely; its owner, alarmed, fearing that such a pounding of hooves would finally unsettle the crumbling stones of his cottage, sought to halter it and was most foully garnished. Several on-lookers, informed as to the cause of the fight, began separately disputing ownership of the egg. Words came hotly and fingers doubled into fists. Strife was imminent; death and desolation might have followed had not a whispered warning circled the group: 'Trice your wings. 'Tis Father O'Donnell himself!'

Excitement subsided with the coming of the priest. 'Oil on Troubled Waters', some called him, unkindly perhaps, for he was fat, floated well, and would have undoubtedly yielded a full hogshead in the boiling. Certainly, for all his fatness, he knew his people, governing them with just that mixture of unbending, persuasive force and magnanimity that ensures obedience but not the spiritual love that was once the cornerstone of religion. Father O'Donnell enjoyed his profession but guaranteed no miracles.

Unhurriedly he paced the street, picking his way over broken places, his shoes squeaking a little, his glance hopping observantly from point to point behind his round spectacles, his beloved dog following at his heels, his coat tails flapping rhythmically so that he seemed to be mechanically impelled. Forelocks were touched and knees bent and the Sign made as he drew level. The group parted to admit him. Nodding benignly he faced the still jousting women, unhesitating in admonishment. 'Peace, women! Where are your wits that ye should have forgotten my teaching?' His

voice was fat too, comfortably assured. After all, he thought, they knew not what they did. 'Why do you fight so outrageously?' He was not disposed to be severe, which was well for them, else they would all have been summoned to attend Mass twice daily for perhaps a week to listen to exhortations on the folly of conflict.

Two frantic voices attempted explanation at the same time, but he checked them both with a wave of his fat white hand, frowning at such impertinence: 'Am I the culprit that ye should stone me so?' Meek laughter rippled through the onlookers, perhaps at the thought of anyone daring to stone a priest. Indicating where she should stand before him, the priest nodded to the O'Banion: 'You shall tell me first.' Her husband was generous in his thank-offerings, and would appreciate precedence. Half-smiling he now stood, bending once to pick a flea from his dog, while the O'Banion gestured and wailed and brandished the battered duck. From time to time he nodded, subduing the impatient Vantalligan with a crooked finger. At last the tale was done, and he bowed as if under the weight of it. 'That is all?' He wished to make sure, extending his hand towards the duck which the O'Banion held tremblingly before him: 'This is the duck?'

First wiping his spectacles upon miraculously clean linen (the church linen was laundered in Dublin) the priest critically regarded the bird, remembering with deep pleasure that one much fatter, magnificently stuffed and basted, would be waiting for him on his return home. With kindly touch he smoothed sorely crumpled feathers, remarking an inconspicuous curl at the tail among other details, smiling a little, for he himself kept ducks, dismissing the O'Banion with a precise rebuke: 'This bird is a drake.'

## EGG IN ROAD

Allowing the point to penetrate he turned from the dumbfounded O'Banion, addressing the gleefully confident Vantalligan, eyeing her shrewdly, remembering minor confessions and whispered tales of stones packed with consignments of moss to increase weight.

'And how was it with you?' His tone was nicely judged to create confidence: 'The egg was a gift from the Cronins of Bearnafincha? (Yes, yes, they certainly kept ducks, but were not by nature generous. Suspicious. Must inquire.) As you were walking home (why walk by way of Bearnafincha when it added four miles to the journey from the shore?) the egg rolled from your basket into the road. At once neighbour O'Banion came pouncing as you returned to recover it, swearing that it had been laid by her dead duck that is not a duck. Yes, yes.' He pondered, fingering his smooth, round chin that was in itself like an egg, seeking wisdom not unworthy of his church: 'Where is your basket and the egg, so that it may be clear to all?'

Absently he tapped the stony way while Vantalligan went for the basket. Gravely he took it from her, careful not to soil his cloth with the dripping weed. He examined the egg as if it were the first of its kind that he had ever seen, replacing it exactly: 'It was here that it happened? You were walking so' (he swung the basket) 'and the egg rolled *and fell!*'

There was a silence, then uproarious laughter. The egg lay broken. Without a word the priest returned the basket to the seething Vantalligan. No need for her to confess to him now. Waiting only to allow his dog to gulp the broken egg he turned and graciously blessed them all, bidding them disperse, stepping serenely homeward, smiling with true pontifical complacency.



## THE UNBELIEVER

HIS name was Melchior Rath. He would whisper it apologetically and tuck it away again like an unclean handkerchief, his whole manner assuring you that he had done nothing whatever to deserve it. He was resident caretaker and curator of the wormy Queen Elizabeth Hunting Lodge dozing in a forest gill to the left of the semi-private Giverne Road. That he enjoyed the dignified solitude of his position was very evident. He was tall and thin and stooped a little as though resisting a strong wind. His tight-buttoned, full-skirted serge coat, trousers sagging over his stout, brilliantly polished boots like the loose skin upon an elephant's leg, black silk cord necktie and flat-crowned black felt hat all suggested a Quaker shipmaster, but the impression was lost directly he spoke, for his voice was singularly gentle and unauthoritative, his words small and neat as berries on a bush, a voice that was like the murmur of a closeted musical box in its fluting, halting harmony. His head was uncommonly large and crowned with dry, sad coloured hair; always was it tilted insecurely in the too-small cup of his collar as though he were listening for the voice of the long dead Queen. The flesh was deeply wrinkled like a peeled chestnut, the skin being of very much the same old bleached colour, his inquiring, long-sighted eyes lying like blue tadpoles in fabric-grained folds. His eyes were less than half the age of his body, matching his shiny, short fingered hands in their restlessness. The while he talked his right hand tugged continually at the lobe of his ear, as though he were milking it, his left hand wriggling under his coat tail or in his pocket like an irritable ferret. As a consequence of frequent

## THE UNBELIEVER

but inexpert use of a huge-bladed pocket knife, one or more fingers were usually bound with green tape in such a way as to look as though they were budding.

The Lodge was open daily between the hours of ten and four. Melchior occupied a small pent-roofed room that overhung the porch like a bird box. In it was a trestle bed, a white enamelled washstand pricked with flea-like scratches, a few clothes hanging in newspaper shrouds, many books wrapped in brown paper, a few strange animals and birds ingeniously fashioned from forest fruits, a cigar-box full of acorns, nuts, oak-galls, flies in pill boxes and bits of bark, a clock without a face looking like a pigmy that had committed *hara-kiri*, a carpet chair and a foot-square photograph of a spider's web torn from a German periodical. He would admit to this room only those who showed an intelligent interest in the architecture of the Lodge. Having made his bed, shaved perfunctorily and breakfasted as simply as the birds in the eaves, he would spend the morning with a whisk of cotton grass in hand, moving from room to room, accompanied by curious drumming echoes, dusting the lumpy furnishings and trays of insects and button-eyed birds in the twilit museum, tracing mouldings and cameos while he murmured the explanations required of him as curator. Practice was necessary since visitors were rare. A midday meal was cooked in summer over a wood fire cupped at a distance from the Lodge, which explains the blackbird-like bubblings usually audible thereabouts when the sun was at its highest. After noon, Melchior was always to be found seated in Queen Elizabeth's chair — to improve the patina, he would explain — in the Octagon Room, with a book propped against her (reputed) ink-horn. On the approach of a visitor he would rewrap the book in brown paper, twitch his

## THE UNBELIEVER

reading glasses upward, so that they lay like twin disks of ice upon his forehead, and hurry to the door, milking his ear in time with an old-fashioned, 'How d'ye do?' It pained him to collect the sixpence charged for admission, so much so indeed that he could not bring himself to touch the coin, but instead would indicate a slotted box with deprecating delicacy. If change was required he would unlock the box and point out the necessary coins exactly as a child might select sweets. All his visitors might have been old friends by the manner of his reception. Offered tobacco, he would refuse with a slight bow: 'My heart is loose strung — already it beats ninety times to the minute,' he would explain, standing silent as though to give you opportunity of marking its pounding. On parting he would watch until you gained the Road, polishing his glasses the while on a disk of chamois, returning to his book with a little smile, as though the sun were shining in his soul.

Every day, about four o'clock, he would scan the Road to see if there were any others of a mind to visit the Lodge. Satisfied that there were none, he would brush and settle his hat firmly, look down at his heels and up at the sky, and lock up the Lodge as carefully as if it were a bank, afterwards tucking the great key into his breast pocket with the shamrock-shaped handle peeping out like a boy over a gunwhale. After damping the fire and twice circuiting the Lodge he would meander thoughtfully down the Road, pausing here and there to listen, gaze and admire, hands busy with a twig, a piece of touchwood or a feather discovered in the path. So might an explorer wander through a new land.

Quite by chance I came upon him one perfect midsummer afternoon. He was seated upon the throne-like bole of the locally famous Seven-Fingered Beech, a mile distant from the Lodge. Low bent and

## THE UNBELIEVER

shadow aged, he looked like the spirit of the tree arisen to breathe the beauty of the day. His hat lay among crisp, sibilant-voiced leaves, a black ship sailing a russet sea; a bird built of a cone, twigs and cotton grass was mounted upon the canted deck, a broken penknife at its feet — sword of a vanquished knight. Melchior was binding a ribbon of scarf skin to his left thumb with green tape. As I entered the dark, foaming-glass-shaped shadow cast across the Road by the tree he glanced up and hailed me cheerfully:

‘How d’ye do on this perfect day? Have you’ — he smiled perkily — ‘Have you a penknife with an unbroken blade? Would you’ — the smile rippled — ‘Would you lend it to me for, say, five minutes, so that I may equip this poor bird with a beak? You laugh, but without malice, unlike a smooth man and a girl who passed a while ago. You yourself are given to shaping brier roots? Excellent! A seat, sir, a seat. Tell me now, where can I buy blackheaded grandmother pins? . . . I like to fit my birds with eyes. You think so? I thank you. An intelligent bird, is it not?’

He lifted the fir-cone bird, introduced us with amusing gravity and gently gouged a socket for a beech-nut beak. I hoped that his thumb was not badly torn.

‘Not at all, sir, not at all. Simply a reminder that the flesh is weak. My hands are finely scarred, you notice, as though runes were written all over them. I fear I do not bleed so freely of late years — drying up, I suppose. Do you happen to remember that little fable of Friar Gossickle, how he pricked his finger on a maid’s bodkin on his hundredth birthday and bled dust — how he gave his soul to a fevered child to play with and emptied his body into the potter’s crucible, much as you might empty a sack? I like such fancies for they suggest the ultimate simplicity very finely.’ He tucked

## THE UNBELIEVER

his thumb into his palm and closed his fingers over it. For a moment he stared, nodding as if watching a wavering flame, and then he turned with suddenly anxious face: 'Are you a virgin? In the flesh but not in spirit! Excellent!' He sighed his satisfaction. 'A full vessel without a crack — it is good, very good. Now with me it's the other way about — in spirit but not in the flesh. Once I had a wife, but she left me, twenty and more years ago. I am not quite clean yet. Between us we present a full shield. And do you believe in God too? In something that may be God — or nothing? Happy man!' He chiselled thoughtfully, smiling at the penknife: 'You have a very good taste in penknives, quite unlike me again. Sometimes I think I was born simply to use up the supply of faulty penknives — for some reason or other they simply fall to pieces in my hands. I don't believe in God at all, you know — not one bit. My beliefs — yours too, perhaps — are really as unimportant as broken penknives, but they amuse us. Some need a God to balance their minds — others do not. Quite simple really. I don't believe in God, can't believe, and as for that which you would call my soul, why, it is only a rainbow spot in my brain, pretty to contemplate but with no more independent life than a streak of snailshine. So I say and so I believe. Somehow I cannot breed mysteries. I wish to make no converts, you understand. If others believe in a deity, why, sometimes I go out of my way to encourage their belief in the same spirit as you describe kelpies and hobgoblins to amuse a child. You are not surprised at this sudden defence? No? Then we are well met. Hark! a woodpecker drumming away there to the left, as though he were summoning all the birds to a grand parade.' He drummed in imitation and went on in a yet softer tone. 'Wings

## THE UNBELIEVER

against the sun — do you know of any sight more satisfying? A simple pleasure again. Do I believe in myself? Oh yes, absolutely, in a severely physical sense. I know myself as a complex bruise-gauge, a nut without a shell, without even a full measure of oil, a poor lord of earth without a claim on heaven. Weak things, these words we use — a pin would serve me better than a ton of them . . . one prick and you would perfectly understand my meaning. Some hold that speech has been the salvation of mankind, yet how can that be when no man, believer or not, is utterly happy? Speech merely intensifies the agony of being — is a disease if you like, one infecting the other without end.' He paused, fidgeting as if gnat-scorched. 'I don't quite know why I am speaking in this way . . . almost as though the warmth of the sun has caused me to erupt. Nine years ago I said as much and it was my undoing, in a conventional sense, that is. But now I have nothing to lose — I will tell you, you may understand. I was employed at a public library as a counter clerk, had been for a decade, responding to high and low requests like an old piano in an auction room. One day, when my guard was lowered, an elderly spinster, an inveterate art needleworker, asked me whether she should add a halo to the God sewn into the altar-piece that was her life work. I explained that as there was no God to take offence, a silk hat would be very much more appropriate, a truer symbol, as it were. She stared, I remember, the poor egret plume on her hat trembling. There was a smut on her nose — I pointed it out with kindly intent. Whether my first words or my last were responsible for my exposure I cannot say, but a week later I was summoned before the library committee, as before a jury. Upon request I restated my belief and a flush of horror rose in every grocerly

## THE UNBELIEVER

face. I — a public servant — guilty of blasphemy! They looked upwards with very real alarm, but the sky did not darken or the walls crumble. There was no pillory in the town other than the local newspaper. I was discharged with ignominy. My successor was required to pass an examination in theology and to produce references from at least three clergymen — poor fellow! The library was clean again, the committee free to resume their bickering over the public funds. For a little while after that I almost believed in a God, believed that he wished me to laugh with him at the idolaters who wore his name in their buttonholes, but I recovered. I wandered about for many months, sponging my mind, something of a pariah. The lodge-keeper chanced to die. A little turf-cutter — my friend — came to me with the news — fortunately he cannot write — and I made application, securing the post simply because the salary was too small to tempt a believer. That is all, an infinitesimal saga.

‘Fairly regularly since my appointment I have read the Bible to my turf-cutter friend. He believes, and I have been careful not to break his belief. I’ve read the Bible many times from first to last, but there is really nothing in it that might not have been written by an absolutely sincere man with aphoristic ability — there is nothing in it except what you yourself put in. The whole truth is that it is so simply written that even the simplest may have a choice of meanings, can hear an echo of their own thoughts. All great literature gives such a choice — that is why it is great, immeasurable in effect. After three hundred years they are still discovering new meanings in Shakespeare’s work. What is the secret? — simply a deliberate ambiguity, nothing more. Scrape away all the mystery that has been piled about the word God and you’ll find that it is nothing

## THE UNBELIEVER

but a word, a little watch of a word that only ticks when it is wound up. . . .

'You smile, but do not argue. Perhaps you are wise in your silent half-belief — it is sustaining and therefore I respect it, even as you respect my own scraped board. The world? — you would know what I think of the universe? Well, as I see it, the world is but a top spinning on for a while, a clock ticking in an empty room; once it was new, but now the paint is wearing off, though men blind themselves to the fact. A mountain crumbles in a moment, destroying man's work of a thousand years; man could not prevent it from falling, neither can he build it up again; he can only scratch at the debris until outwardly it resembles his other works. All the time, men are trying to cover up their own littleness; natural paint is not good enough for them; if they cannot alter it out of all recognition they do their best to wipe it out, cover it up. Is any flower the better for man's meddling? How does a "giant primula" compare with a natural wood primrose? — a painted countess sniffing at a labourer's comely child!

'Men swarm like lice, only with less purpose, in scabs of their own making; die like lice, even manufacturing their own diseases, and all the time the top is slowing as if they were not. Soon — as Time goes — they will all be dead and the top will rock a little, spilling the seas, splitting the mountains like so many raindrops and bits of dust, demolishing all trace of man in a breath, and then it will topple, roll away to join other bits of grit lost in nothingness. For me, I want only to enjoy the loveliness of the paint that is left. But consider the folly of so much talk on this, the longest day of the year, when the paint is brightest. . . .'

The beak was fitted, the quaint bird held up for my inspection and approval. His blue eyes warmed as they



## THE UNBELIEVER

embraced every aspect of Road, trees and sky, and he slowly milked his ear, finding other words:

'The longest day of the year — did you know? Months ago I set aside this day for a purpose. For eight smooth years I've been Lodgekeeper, but not once in all that time have I reached the end of the Road. An odd thing, for it is very short, as Roads go — eight miles from end to end, but surely eight miles of the most beautiful road in all the world. There is so much to see; I cannot walk fast lest my heart bounce off its string; I look this way and that, see a bird, a flower, the lake perhaps, and I stop until I am filled with the song of the bird, with the scent and colour of the flower or the cool stillness of the lake. When at last I look up again, thinking to move on, why it is night! By keeping my eyes fixed on the path I've gone some four miles of the way before dark, before ten o'clock in the morning, but no further. It really hurts me to think of the wonders that may be in those last four miles. To-day, I've been thinking I'll make the journey from end to end, drink deep, so deep that I'll never be thirsty again. Eight miles — I shall surely do it before dusk and then I shall return through the darkness and it will be as though I am walking between scented silks and velvet. Giverne Road it is called — I love the very name. Chance has made it too flinty and dalely for geared wheels, put it out of the path of those who like their scenery in paper bags. Giverne was the name of the maker, so I've read. William Giverne — there are awed references to him in the county records; a wise and generous man, it appears, a law unto himself. He certainly discovered the most pleasurable of all activities in the making of such a road as this. Can you think of any greater happiness than planning the way of a road, deciding which side of a lake it shall

## THE UNBELIEVER

skirt, what curves it shall take to embrace particular beauties? As I see it, he built the road solely for his own delight; it serves no commercial purpose, either now or in his time; it simply meanders through eight miles of field and forest without so much as a fence in its length. Giverne saw it just as I've seen it almost every day for eight years. He must have loved it naked and in every phase of dress, even as I do. The wonders I've seen — why, if they were written down with all I've felt, the result would very well serve as a Bible for Unbelievers. I've watched the birds go and return with the warmth of the new years, great flights of them — they all know me. When birds are few, dead leaves in the trees imitate their preening movements for my delight. I've only to shut my eyes to see again the red haze of the haws, the blanket skies, misty blue distances and soot-shaded paths of winter; to see the Venetian glass of ice laced above swollen streams, countless skirts of dead leaves exactly like minute, discarded shoe soles, freckled with the hairy decapitated heads of beechmast and beetle-drilled oak-apples all ready for threading; the last gay leaves of the willows fluttering like hooked goldfish; snow outlines and expanses patterned with footprints of fox, bird and rabbit, with the wiry maned silver birches looming like slim columns of fog, and the curly bulk of the elms bent studiously about the unlit candelabra of the chestnuts; the lake itself looking like a lake of smoke, like you'd expect the top of a cloud to look. From Wentletrap Hill I've watched the lights of the town moving down in the valley like luminous fish in a silent sea, heard the wind playing through the trees as skilfully as if they were really harps, stared and wondered at the stars clinging to the sky like glinting drops of water to a great black bowl. I know the very trees in which

## THE UNBELIEVER

dormice sleep in their neat balls of grass, and the pockets in the lakeside where frogs and toads sleep too. Day after day I've heard the needle-against-thimble crackling of a squirrel crunching nuts in a tree-top, laughed at its sudden chattering alarm, followed its liquid curveting flight until I've grown unsteady on my feet. I've a thousand pictures of spring, of buds like clenched fists and tiny cigars, of the scraps of new green in the hedges and new-tempered grass blades everywhere; of the pink transparence of a lamb's ears against the sun and the wild ducks trying to dance on the lake. I've heard the stock doves keening and the chatter of livelier birds sounding like the whirring clatter of a thousand toy windmills, a clatter that shreds into a thousand lovely songs as the days ripen. I've watched queen wasps laying the foundations of their tiered cities and seen butterflies quiver into perfect being. And then summer, as it is now, with the forest a warm green cave and flowers raining upwards in every glade and leaves flashing as if made of bright metal; dragon flies quartering the lake and rats feeding on the lily petals by night; now a glimpse of smoke-grey deer prancing away, fore feet and hind feet together, reminding you of an electrified rocking horse — or a galloping stoat, its tail whipping like a derisive, charcoal-smudged finger. At night the sweet warmth of drowsy flowers floods the world, even the seas. You hear the scuffling of mice, the screech of a white owl, the startling cry of a badger — an echo of crime itself — or the tiny glasslike squeak of a bat; maybe the bark of a fox, followed by the fevered cry of a vixen. And then come the fireless flames of autumn, coral buttoned hedges, the last flowers bowing into sleep, woodmice feasting on seeds in old birds' nests and companies of goldfinches tearing the burdock heads to pieces, perched

## THE UNBELIEVER

like personified flames upon ancient candlesticks....'

He smiled, sighing a little: 'My head is full of such memories. I could very well write a history of the Road and its borders — such a history! Perhaps I will sometime when my heart swings easily. But first I must know it all. I'll describe Giverne's original tour, the planning of it with a knife point upon his saddle; the bringing of chalk from Martinhope Quarry for the surface; Giverne's first ride over its length, a ride occupying all of a day, so much was there to see. I'll mark off the years one by one, tell how in rainy seasons the lake overflows, lies like a great steel petal across the Road, how in Giverne's time stilts were retained on either side of the flooded hollow for the convenience of the few who travelled the Road; how the ear-like curve by Sevenhang Copse was caused after Giverne's death by horses shying at the dead sheepstealers that hung there in chains until only the chains were left; how it was once believed that the iron veins striping the Road here and there were caused by the bleeding feet of the Devil. I could write so much, although four miles only of the Road are known to me as yet. Listen! Lowanger Church that must be — the wind is right. Chong-chong-chong-chong-chong! Five o'clock, so soon! I must be on my way. Your penknife... I thank you.'

First polishing the blade upon a yellow silk handkerchief, he snapped it shut and placed the knife upon my knee. For a moment he gazed at the cone-bird, stroking its cotton grass plumage very gently, weighing some thought:

'Such a handsome creature, needing only a pair of black-headed pin eyes to equal the best of us. Would you accept him as a symbol of our understanding? No thanks, I beg you. Exchange knives? But mine, you see...? Well, well, you are very good. The Road

## THE UNBELIEVER

shall know of it, I promise you. May I hope that you will come to the Lodge sometime that I may make you free of all its secrets? You will? Excellent!

He rose stiffly, hat in hand, waited for his heart to take the strain, and bowed as if I were king:

'I wish you a very good evening, sir. Treat the bird well . . . good-bye.'

The felted leaves whispered as he stepped out of the shadow and along the Road. His head jerked from side to side as he discovered new wonders. I saw him pull three rushes, bite the tips and begin plaiting them. Two hundred yards away, a belt of forest shade darkened the path. It seemed to soak him up. The ring of his caulked boots became fainter, died away. After a while I too went on my way, holding the cone-bird in my hand that it might not suffer damage. As I remember, I sang a little until a prosy carter grinned with depressing conviction.

Eight days wheeled by, and once again I trod Giverne Road. As I approached the Lodge I felt as though I was soon to drink of a rare wine. I had a tale to tell of the cone-bird, of a child's reverent delight. But it so happened that the tale was not to be told. A tight-faced, velveteened forest keeper was reading a pink newspaper in the porch of the Lodge. My question moved him to heavy speech:

'Old Rath? To be sure I do, Maister. His heart blew up some seven mile down the road on Midsummer Eve. They found him kneeling down, like as if he was praying. They do reckon his wits were summat frayed for his pockets were 'most full of cones and leaves and sechlike muck, and he'd a-holden of a crazy toy bird in each hand just as if he were a-hoping to fly to kingdom-come.'

## ALICE, WHERE ART THOU?

It was a long, long journey, done in haste, but the sale was a good one. A genial friend had sent George word at the last minute, mentioning that there were books enough to pave the Market Square and that there would be little opposition.

George read the letter in one grumbling gulp — we were sitting in his gas-lit shop over a bottle of vintage port he'd picked up at a sale somewhere, something not in the catalogue — yelled upstairs to his patient wife that he was off on another wild-goose and would be home come Thursday, and invited my company all in a breath. Banging his crumpled hat more firmly on his long, bony head, he grabbed the several yards of woollen scarf which served him for overcoat and tore away down through the sleepy town to the garage in Coxwroastle Mews.

His car was very old and latchety, a thug on wheels, incredibly uncomfortable and with a hood that wheezed and flapped like a vampire over one's head. He had taken it in settlement of a debt and probably kept it as a reminder not to incur other bad debts. It was middle winter and we had to prime and wind her terrifically. As usual, when we were near to collapse, she started with a sardonic coughing and smoking and we cruised out into the bleak, cavernous night with but two will-o'-the-wisp headlights to guide us the one hundred and thirty miles to Buncham where the sale was due to begin at eleven o'clock the next morning.

I was certain, privately, that we should not get there in time, but George had no doubts at all. Ferociously he hounded the car onwards, blaspheming and remin-

## ALICE, WHERE ART THOU?

iscing turn and turn about, achieving remarkable speeds, chief engineer of a blind man's nightmare.

Soon after dawn we reached Buncham, pulling up outside the brand-new pub of the friend who had sent such kindly word. We knocked and he came downstairs in nightshirt and waistcoat, blinking and cursing until he saw George; then he beamed and bounced and gave us home-cured ham and outsize eggs, inch-thick toast soaked in fresh butter, and mulled beer, lighting a great, warming fire, even playing a tune or two on his accordion at George's request.

George, before his book-dealing, had been an insurance assessor and had awarded the publican a fine new pub on a very shaky claim, merely as a matter of principle however, for, as he said, pubs and publicans should be encouraged at all costs. I think he held the same generous views about innumerable other trades and people, for soon afterwards he ceased to be an assessor and was dealing largely in books, having bought a bankrupt business overnight and refloated it successfully purely by force of character.

He had always had a flair for books. At a sale or in a private house he could positively smell the presence of a desirable book. The trade jeered at first, but when his superior instinct and knowledge were proved they became respectful, called him George to his face and a qualified George to his back, admitting him to the knockout and withholding information as often as possible.

But George had friends in many places and frequently he cleaned up an out-of-the-way sale without any opposition whatever, only grinning amiably when taxed with perfidy. And so it was at Buncham; there was but one local dealer present and he hadn't a chance.

The sale was held at a lovely, terraced manor house

that seemed, in the morning mist, to float like the ghost of an old three-decker ship on the rolling, purpled greensward. In the valley was a fast, trouty river and George, missing nothing, made friends with the water bailiff and arranged with him for us to come in the summer for a few days' fishing.

Lot by lot he bought the books, rapping out a brisk 'Two bob!' with a take-it-or-leave-it air, and the auctioneer, young, ignorant and energetic, took it every time. The country dealer, whiskered and over-cautious, made one or two timid attempts at bidding, but the hammer fell before he could stammer out a decisive offer and George cleared the board.

They were a weedy lot of books apart from the dozen among the thousand that were worth pounds where pence had been paid. There was a nice 1633 *Donne's Poems*, for example, a middling *Britannia's Pastorals*, a miraculously uncut *Irene*, a bunch of early Juveniles which no child had ever handled — they were wrapped in partly embroidered baby linen, bought expectantly and not wanted, it seemed — a very pretty collection of Ainsworths and some stuffy Strawberry Hills. The remainder included grim and romantic fiction of no quality, theology by the stone, witchcraft and tuppenny philosophy, and a collection of brewer's textbooks and records, for the late owner had been a brewer of some size, proud of his string of gold-toothed pubs.

George also bought for next-to-nothing a very large bow and bundle of arrows and a beautiful pair of guns as a gift for the publican, arranging for them to be delivered separately with his grateful compliments, the bow first, as a joke, for the publican was a master shot, then the guns, as balm. Time was spent in finding messengers and when we returned to clear and settle we found that the porter, helpfully as he thought, had



## ALICE, WHERE ART THOU?

loaded the car with the whole of the books so that it looked like a monstrous frog gorged with sandwiches.

George shook the body thoughtfully, hoped the springs would stand the strain, rewarded the porter beyond all expectation, and settled himself for the homeward drive. But twenty miles of bumping and creaking and lurching convinced us that we were overloaded and George made his decision with Napoleonic ease.

We had halted upon the verge of a pleasant village green with a deep and convenient ditch alongside the road. Cottage lights glimmered here and there through the first dimness of evening. It was very quiet and I had the feeling that Time was waiting, watching us, that our sins would find us out.

George stood like a man dipping sheep, lifting bundle after bundle, extracting the nuggets and heaving the rest into the ditch. In ten minutes it was done, the waste jettisoned and the car riding light and free once more.

'A nice gift,' George grinned: 'Books for nothing! Donation of a Library to Little Hipcomfort. . . .'

Cynically I pointed out the other side of the question, of the campaign against litter, agreeing however that in spirit his gift was identical with many others, only lacking fanfares. Gaily we drove on. At the end of the green we passed a quaint, mossy old pub called the Scudding Cloud which made us laugh for by comparison with our former state we were now the equal of any cloud.

It was rather more than six months later that we went that same road again, on holiday bent, for George had not forgotten the fishing. The car was the same but in better temper as if it too were invigorated by full

## ALICE, WHERE ART THOU?

summer and the thought of holiday. Noonday found us at the Scudding Cloud gazing in astonishment, for the place was hardly recognizable under a false front, staring new paint and many matey placards. Now it was road-housey, Dick-Turpinish where once it had been sweet and modest as any rose. Unbelievably we stared, looking for the pile of books, for evidence that it was indeed the same place. But the books were gone save for a few draggled boards and leaves. As we raked them over, a fat and confident fellow approached, eyeing us thoughtfully:

‘Looking for something?’ he inquired.

‘I might ask you the same,’ George snapped.

‘No offence. I was just wondering. I’m Isaac Platty and that’s my pub backalong.’

‘Been doing some spring-cleaning, haven’t you?’

‘So you *have* been this way before! Well, I’m asking no questions mind, but if ye had aught to do with the dumping of a ton of books hereabouts I’m grateful. Made a world of difference to this place, them books did, livened it up no end. There’ve been a couple of suicides and three murders since, good red ’uns, that brought a plenty of trade to me; a religious revival, a cottager’s daughter read how it was done and went and nobbled the Squire’s son and married him too, we has Shakespeare ’stead o’ boy scout concerts and I found a pack o’ stuff on how pubs are run in the metropolis and such like places; made me feel fair old-fashioned. Come and have a look round. I’d like your opinion and the drinks are on the house, cocktails or anything else ye fancy.’

We went and looked and very horrible it was, flashy and comfortless, all chromium plate, plywood and mirrors. The landlōrd served beer in fancy fluted glasses — he’d slung the old bent pewter out, he told

## ALICE, WHERE ART THOU?

us — and provided double-decker sandwiches crammed with anchovies, olives and cold potato.

We ate and drank hurriedly, grimly amused. George, missing nothing, as usual, noticing several books at the back of a glass case, asked to look and the publican showed them very willingly. I looked too and nearly fainted for one of them was an 1866 *Alice in Wonderland* in rare condition.

'I'll give you ten pounds for it,' George said casually.

The publican grinned: 'Not likely! There was a book on auciton records among that lot in the ditch, found 'em side by side in fact, and it says that one like that is worth a hundred quid easy.'

George never blinked, only turned to me and said calmly: 'Well, there's your case, stealing by finding.' The publican dropped a glass and George shook his head reprovingly: 'You understand the position? That parcel of books was lost from my car . . . we've been hunting for months. No, we certainly don't suppose you pinched 'em in the first place, but you have been holding that book out of your turn. There's been a reward of ten pounds offered for it. Looks like you're in a sticky position.'

The publican gulped uncomfortably: 'I wasn't to know. . . .'

'Quite so, but what do you intend to do now?'

'Well, is it too late to claim that reward?'

'Bit foxy, aren't you? What about it?' George eyed me soberly: 'It's all right with me . . . I only want the book back.'

I coughed and hummed. George winked at the landlord and led me to the door: 'Leave it to me. I'll fix it. See you outside.'

So outside I went and in a minute George followed,

## ALICE, WHERE ART THOU?

the *Alice* in his hand. Briskly we reached the car and drove off. I looked at George:

'I ought to arrest you or something for false representation, you snake-in-the-grass!'

George laughed: 'Bit of luck, wasn't it? Can't think how we missed it in the first place. Nice present for the wife. I've been promising her one for years; her mother knew old Dodgson. I told old Platty I'd have to square you, gave him a fiver and said it would cost me the other fiver to fix you. Here it is, although you're a lousy detective.'

Jubilantly we drove on to the river and the water bailiff's cottage. He was pleased to see us, but sad too, for his neighbour's cottage had been burned down two nights before and a husband and wife dead and only a child saved. He was taking care of the child until they sent for her from the orphanage. She sat watching gravely as he told us, prim and quiet, with tight curling hair and bright, wide eyes, four years old but somehow unguessably older. The bailiff was a bachelor and unhappy with children and it was with relief that he watched George make friends with the child.

Alice was her name and in no time at all she was laughing and chattering merrily. While the bailiff drew home-brewed beer and fried enormous pork steaks for us George told her stories, sketching scenes and things with a wave of his hand, keen and young again himself. Remembering the book in his pocket he took it out, reading of one Alice to this namesake, explaining Tenniel's pictures with dramatic zest. And the child was delighted, lonely no longer, but, reaching impetuously to turn a page her hand caught George's elbow and a pint of nutbrown was spilt disastrously over the almost mint *Alice*.

Again I nearly fainted, but George only sighed and

## ALICE, WHERE ART THOU?

mopped up Alice's frock, more concerned with her dismay than with his own loss. The book was ruined; not even ether or the tricks of the restorer could make the pages white again or the boards a presentable red.

'Not much good as a present for the wife now,' he said presently with mild regret. 'And I did promise her the first *Alice* I found.'

Then, suddenly, he began to laugh and bounce Alice joyously on his knee: 'God damn it! What's a book anyway? I'll take the youngster home instead. Hey, Jim, how'd it be if the wife and I adopt young Alice? We've none of our own, but Alice may change our luck. Done! You stay and get some fishing, Emm, and I'll take her home right now before the Institution claims her. I'll be back to-morrow . . . save me some big 'uns. . . .'

## SWEET AND LOVELY

THAT was what they used to call Jenny Wraxall before the arrival of Red Gulliver and his aeroplane. Sweet and Lovely. And so she was, a merry, slender beauty with frank blue eyes, a clear, glowing skin, lips full and rich and lively, and true sun-smoke hair. She walked lightly, jauntily, as with a sure knowledge of the best summer to come, happy as a bird at dawn and with a whistle as melodious. In those days she whistled a lot, tiny scraps of tunes, now tricky and sprightly, now soft and dreamy, that were like fine satins tried on for a moment and discarded for a lovely, languid nakedness.

She lived with her father on the edge of the village on Gallveston Marsh, a huddled, windswept, sun-and-sea-bleached place within sight of a prosperous coast town but apart from it, like a fledgeling fallen from a nest still alive but promised to death. Her father was deaf and nearly blind, but he'd a bit of a pension and in summer Jenny provided teas for visitors, earning enough to keep out of debt and clothe herself well and tastefully. In the eyes of some she dressed too well. 'Silk! Silk! Always silk! It would do her good to wear flannel, and a lot of it, too!' But the boys of the village thought otherwise.

Tantalized by her style they would call after her as they lounged on the pump steps opposite pub and post office: 'Hey, there, Jenny Wrenny, what about a kiss all round for luck?' daring each other to rush her and make a job of it. 'Hiho! Sweet 'n' Lovely, got something to tell you...' But Jenny wasn't interested. She knew them too well for what they were, just a rude, heavy-handed lot of farmers' boys dressed

## SWEET AND LOVELY

absurdly like commercial travellers and with much the same rank brand of interests. She didn't quite know what she wanted to match the singing inside her, but she knew that they had nothing to suit. So with a perky wave of her hand she'd pass them by, sweet and lovely enough to make some of them sweat and dream violently, fenced by rainbows from the smirchy touch of ordinary flesh.

Then Red Gulliver came, unexpected and disturbing as a hand reaching suddenly down from heaven. He arrived very early one morning in May like a scorched grasshopper, as someone said, waking the village, flying low, scraping roofs as if he meant to lift them and look inside, landing neatly and noisily in the meadow beside the Wraxalls' bright-painted bungalow. In a little while there was a gossipy, curious crowd grouped round his ancient plane, fingering it childishly, astonished that such ordinary, wispy stuff should fly. The hovering, red-painted, tin gull-shape screwed to the fuselage, symbol of his name and trade, part of a weather vane damaged on his first solo and retained as a luck-piece, amused them all until someone started an argument as to whether there really were any red gulls anywhere. The ayes and nays started flinging turves at each other, and Red stepped in with a can of petrol. dowsing them all, threatening fire if they didn't bugger off quick. He followed to the gate with a chalked board advertising flips at five shillings a time, and asked who owned the field, stumping along to the Wraxalls' bungalow like a wrapped piece of machinery, scarcely human, Jenny decided, when she first saw him.

He was short, stocky, grimy, red-haired and snarling-ugly in face. He smoked cigarettes rapidly and constantly, so that after a time it simply seemed that he

was continually breaking off a little flaming growth from his mouth, breaking it off, breathing a smoky sigh of relief and stamping it underfoot. Then it was growing there again, and he'd suffer it for a few minutes before screwing it out and stamping upon it. His ragged leather coat was grease-stained into curious map-shapes as if it had somehow retained an impression of all the places it had ever seen. Red himself was like that, too, bunched and scarred by unwilling contact with earth, shaped and battered by speed, brooding angry because of his shape and its need to touch earth at all, at least the same place twice.

'I want to use your field for the summer. Joy-riding. Pay you well.'

Old Wraxall, when the words were roared at him again, nodded in amiable agreement, lost to the disadvantages of the arrangement, lost to noise and all other sensations except the pleasurable one of smoking black twist and the gulping of whisky, both of which would be made more frequent by this additional income. Jenny looked on with faint disgust and unease, thinking only that the aeroplane would help her trade in teas and perhaps bring a better kind of custom. Red hardly looked at her. Jenny was annoyed. He probably expected her to provide meals for him, wait on him. But she was mistaken. 'Nothing from Nobody' might have been his motto. Jenny was hurt and disappointed. She would have enjoyed tantalizing him. Most men wanted what she had and weren't slow in showing their need. You'd think this one had his choice of angels by his manner. She laughed to think of him chasing angels in his noisy box of tricks, chasing and never catching.

Red stared to hear her laugh. He may have guessed that she was laughing at him, but he wasn't bothered:



## SWEET AND LOVELY

just another flighty bit of small change, that was all. Nodding an O.K. to Old Wraxall he stumped evenly back to the plane, damning some venturesome kids who'd got too near. No one seemed in need of a joy-ride, and he wasn't begging them. He just lugged a dirty old tent and flea-bag from the plane and set about camping in a corner under a hedge. Watching from the porch Jenny felt angry, snubbed and a little frightened for the first time in her life.

After a week the village took no more notice of the aeroplane. It was just another stunt to make money, they decided, and a damned risky one at that. For a while they laid bets in the pub on the probability of a crash, but more urgent matters quickly rose to claim attention. Only Jenny actively hated plane and pilot. At first. Every time the plane swooped low over the bungalow she flinched as might a chick harassed by a hawk, except that the hawk hadn't seen her, didn't even want to see her. She couldn't explain her feelings very sensibly. She didn't care, she told herself lamely, after a while, but it was a lie. She heard Red tell her father that he was only doing the joy-riding until he'd money enough to buy a real crate, a record-breaker.

'In ten years we'll be flying round and round the globe easy as winding string, or if you feel like it you'll be able to stay upstairs for a month at a time, chasing the sun. How'd you like that, a month of sunlight and the damned old world just a sort of petrol pump run by a bloke with a wooden leg?'

Such ideas worried and frightened Jenny. They weren't safe ideas for any man to have; they were nothing more than a sort of madness in which love had no place, the sort of ideas God ought to keep to himself. Absurd to think of Red Gulliver sharing ideas with

## SWEET AND LOVELY

God. If he'd been less ugly, hard, cold and casual it would have been different, not absurd but beautiful, understandable. Red had no right to such ideas; without love and kindness he was nothing, just a thief, one machine playing with another machine defiantly: one day they'd both be smashed and no loss.

And, like a machine, Red took no notice whatever of Jenny's rain or shine. He had too many troubles of his own just then and no money to waste in mending them. Much of his time was spent in tinkering the ailing engine. Kids bothered him for a day or so, but they kept away after he flicked some molten solder in the face of one. Jenny ran to censure after she'd dabbed oil on the weeping boy, but Red only scowled.

'Aw, for Christ's sake shut up! I told 'em what I'd do if they swiped any more tools. What the bloody hell's it got to do with you, anyway? I got enough troubles already.' He paused to light another cigarette. 'Now you're here just give that prop a swing. . . .'

After that he often shouted to her to come and swing the prop, any thanks he might have uttered being lost in the splutter and roar of the engine. Jenny obeyed and justified herself weakly in the thought that he was paying for it in the rent of the field, anyway.

Trade was slow at first, but Red didn't seem to worry. On fine days he took the plane over to a neighbouring airport for inspection and petrol, towering and diving back on the field as if he hoped to scare the few bumps and ruts completely out of it, landing dexterously and off-handedly as a messenger boy off a bicycle. He could do anything with the plane, but his broad, tanned, ugly face never showed the faintest pleasure or enthusiasm. He slept and ate in the little tent, wet or fine, sleeping in his clothes, eating bread and bacon and not much else, drinking strong black tea and shaving

## SWEET AND LOVELY

only when his face itched, smoking perpetually and reading the old bits of newspaper in which food had been wrapped, reading very slowly and carefully as if each word were broken and must be pieced together before it gave up its meaning. But all his reading, all his doing, seemed no more than a marking time, as if he lived not ordinarily from minute to minute, but between time.

The very last man on earth you'd think sweet and lovely Jenny would fall for, but she fell right enough and without much help from Red. He did ask her once, sourly, if she'd like a trip down the coast to see the wreck of an airship, but Jenny didn't like the idea at all; she was sure she would be sick and that Red only wanted her to go so that he could show off his paces. Piqued, she said as much, but Red only spat, scratched his red head with an oily fist and asked her what the bloody hell she was hanging about for, then?

Regularly he called to pay Old Wraxall the rent agreed upon, always refusing whisky, never asking any favour. Sometimes Jenny would hear him, very early in the morning or very late at night, filling his canvas bucket at the pump, and she writhed in foolish anger, hating him for his blindness. He was just a flying pig, not a man at all. But afterwards she'd admit that that was a lie too. He had something all the others hadn't got, an aim, a one-idea which gave him dignity. He didn't scrape and crawl. He believed in something outside sex, and for that reason Jenny wanted to give sex to him, wanted to make him admit that she was sweet and lovely and necessary even to him. She didn't reason it out quite like that, but she knew that she wanted his recognition more than anything else. Maybe it wouldn't be love that he had to give, but whatever it was she wanted it, heart and soul. It was the only thing she

## SWEET AND LOVELY

could share with him and in sharing know how he was different.

No sense to it, but Jenny didn't care. She dressed in her neat best and sat about where Red could see her as he passed on his way to the village for bread or tobacco, but he only nodded crabbedly, absent-mindedly. Jenny, hurt, sulked and tried to stop her heart from bumping every time he made a landing. Day after day she imagined him doing the wrong thing, wrecking the plane and himself, being brought to the bungalow, lying under her care. She'd know then what he was made of. Crazy at night she wondered what she could do to make him crash, but she was afraid that he might be killed, and so did nothing. Only, as the days outshone each other into full summer, she grew morose, embittered by failure.

Red himself seemed to have forgotten how to smile until the evening he re-entered his tent after a busy day with trippers and found his blankets washed and folded and his oil lamp cleaned and filled. He smiled and shrugged and grunted a bit at that, but didn't do anything. It probably didn't occur to him to do anything. He just waited, and, sure enough, thinking him to be away down in the village, Jenny peeped into the tent one night. 'Oh!' was all she said, and Red pulled her in beside him, flinging his cigarette away, saying nothing, ripping at her clothes. There was no beauty about it, only a plunging, brutal urgency, pain for Jenny, and then a deep, mournful, unimaginable ecstasy.

After that she went to the tent often, though Red never asked her to in as many words. Sometimes he had no use for her and she would go hungry away. He was no warmer, more human than before, but now there was a curious fighting bond between them. Sharing a key they yet grudged each other entry, meeting and

## SWEET AND LOVELY

parting always like enemies, the middle plunge leaving no warming, gracious echo in them. Still sweet and lovely to the eye, Jenny felt lame and verjuiced, her mind swinging frighteningly between extremes of happiness and horror, especially after the first month. At times she was shy and timid, precariously happy, at others hard, almost brazen. Some days she turned the 'Teas' board face inwards, too taut and weary to wait on cheerfulness. For hours she would sit in the porch and watch Red stunting like a scrap of nightmare over the village, her knowledge of him glowing hot, ready for permanent life within her if he should miscalculate and die, but shrinking icily when he grounded safely and she knew that knowledge would be renewed. She hated the thought of his clumsy urgent touch, but when the moment came it seemed to her that she was touched by more than life, dipped in heaven and flung shuddering back to dead, pitiful earth. On wet days she would still sit and watch the smoke of Red's cigarettes jetting from the tent like wisps of cloud returning to the sky now that he had finished with them and longing would move in her, a sad, hopeless longing for comfort and gentleness soft as smoke. But there was no gentleness in Red no matter how desperately she cried out. Still she must go to him.

Slowly Jenny lost her spring and perfect colour, growing listless and drably pale and careless in her dress, burdened with an intolerable knowledge. In the past she had laughed to hear that So-and-so was going to have a baby; now they would be able to laugh at her, unless she did something first. She thought vaguely, drearily of suicide, of drowning herself out on the mud flats, or a quick end with the pistol Red kept in a kit-bag in the tent. A quick end for him, too, if only she could manage it, she thought viciously at times.

## SWEET AND LOVELY

It was Red who questioned her first. It was the beginning of September and soon business would stop for him. He had made money and would soon be able to have a snatch at something worth while. A hell of a way to make money, but it was the best he knew. He was sick of the village; a ton of bombs would do a lot of good. Jenny was just another bit of it, gone stale and shabby like the rest. 'What the hell's wrong with you?' he asked. She told him, and he spat disgustedly. 'Should've thought you'd have known better, going about all dolled up and brassy, too. What's the big idea, pinning it on me?'

Jenny wept and told him he was the first. 'Like hell!' Red swore and told her she'd better get some pills and gin and quinine, quick, and wasn't there an old girl somewhere in the village who could fix things? Not a word about marriage, though Jenny hadn't expected it. Now she only wanted to be left alone, to sit in quietness and wish back the old harmony. From the first she hadn't known what she expected the outcome to be; it had simply been something she had to do, to know, a something in Red which demanded willing service of her. Not a practical impulse or a practical knowledge now that she had it, but that made no difference. Mournfully she sent away for pills and gin and quinine, swallowing detestable mixtures, but without the desired result.

Red, appealed to, shrugged and stamped his cigarette underfoot. It wasn't up to him; if she didn't know any better, well, 'twas high time she learned for her own good. Bloody young fool, to carry on like that and expect him to chase the lemon. Well, if it wasn't money she was after, what the hell did she want? Since he couldn't see that it was sympathy she wanted, Jenny didn't bother to tell him. Scratching his red head

ferociously, Red somehow loosened an idea. What about a trip upstairs in the kite? That might make her sick and ill enough to do the trick. Jenny didn't like the idea, but she liked still less the thought of carrying a baby when Red was gone. Anyway, she wasn't blaming him; it had just happened.

'Better make it soon, too, by the look of it.' Red lit another cigarette and turned again to his engine, wishing the effing bastards in hell for a cockeyed design; good metal and a knowledge of what they wanted it to do, yet they couldn't think straight long enough to make a skinner of it. . . .

That same afternoon Jenny climbed tremblingly into the plane, and Red strapped her fast, the stale, smoky, oily smell of him blowing stormily about her. He gave her a helmet and goggles with a word. It was a cold, cloudy, squally day and no one was about. Jenny hated the belt with its complicated fastening and thought it was to prevent suicide. She screamed as Red opened up the engine and the grass of the field merged into a green-grey silky blur. They headed straight for a barn, and Jenny shut her eyes in an agony of fear. But Red lifted the plane neatly over, climbing sharply. He hadn't even bothered to connect the speaking-tube; she wouldn't have anything important to say, anyway.

For an hour Red slipped about the sky as if tracing the shape of a dream, doubling ferociously among clouds, towering and rolling and spinning like a blinded bird, looping and jerking the plane into queer waggings that were like semi-human shrugs of the shoulder, controlling it even in its most floppiest, wind-flustered moments with arrogant ease, diving it down through cloud and tunnelling space until it seemed that the wings must be wrenched from the complaining body, chasing contours and whipping over and about the

## SWEET AND LOVELY

village like a shabby, hungry bird-ghost, a dented template dropped from some heavenly machine-room, every lift and twist and turn expertly smooth, miraculously so considering the age and dead, trembly substance of the plane.

At first Jenny sat in terrified stillness, her mind leaping on ahead of her body, startled to see the familiar village drawing away from her like something drifting away down a green-scummed stream. Those first few minutes were a kind of death, a stitching of nerves into a single bleeding, racing oneness, a leap from reality into the unliving mirror-distances of delirium. Then her mind bolted back to the depths of her body, crouched and shrivelled, watching in flinching horror. She fought cold mists of cloud, screaming uncontrollably, but the sound was lost in the whining roar of flight, lost easily as if it had never been, meaningless in this out-of-time. She became icy cold without knowing it, and then her skin prickled hotly, wetly as the plane rolled and the earth spun madly like a frenzy of flags beneath the clouds. She was sick. Her belly squirmed and boiled. She shut her eyes, but her mind swung on, anticipating and completing figures beyond the scope of the plane. She tugged whimperingly at the wide, tight belt, but her fingers were blind and wooden and scuffled erratically away in search of a hold as the plane rolled again. Ceaselessly now she retched, spitting scaldingly, and it was as if her belly were trying vainly, desperately, to crawl upwards and out of her mouth.

Landing smoothly — a neat understroke at the end of a suicide's letter — Red lit a cigarette and lifted Jenny from the cockpit, grunting a consoling word, pleased with his idea, for she seemed half-dead, so that the half-alive thing inside her must surely be dead. A pitifully weak, shuddering ghost of the old Sweet and



## SWEET AND LOVELY

Lovely, she could not stand alone. Clumsily he carried her to the bungalow, shouting assurance to old man Wraxall. 'A bit sick, nothing much. Which room?' kicking open the door and dumping her on the narrow, creaking bed, hunting out the gin and quinine bottles and pouring out a stiff measure, forcing her to drink.

'Take it easy, kid. You'll be all right. I'll be seeing you.'

And away he stumped to tinker with the plane, taking off for a joy-ride or two as the afternoon cleared, the fierce sounds of his flights hardly reaching Jenny as she lay in agony at a shadowed world's end.

The next morning, calling with his canvas bucket for water, Red put his head through the window of Jenny's room, a cigarette hopping on his lips as he spoke. 'Hello, kid. How goes it?' After a minute she heard him and nodded weakly, pointing to the stool near the window. Red lifted the lid, staring critically: 'Looks O.K.,' he grunted. Lifting the pail through the window he slung the contents briskly across a dividing wall into a neighbouring pig-pound, replacing it, jetting smoke explosively. 'So long, kid. Take care of yourself.'

For a week Jenny staved off her father's suggestion that she should see a doctor, thanking God for his half-blindness and his deafness, too, that he had not seen her weakness or heard her moanings when the pains were beyond endurance. Slowly, as if afraid to venture back where hurt was so easily come by, life returned to her thin, unlustred body. Her father brought her dull, heavy food, but for days she only wanted to drink. As in a dream she heard his stumblings as he pottered in the kitchen, preparing food for himself. Fortunately food did not worry him overmuch; a smoke and a drop of whisky went a long way.

The dream broke one morning when she heard him

## SWEET AND LOVELY

talking to Red in the porch. 'Going away? Why, I'm real sorry to hear that.' She could almost hear Red nodding like the clumsy piece of machinery he was. Very slowly and carefully she dressed, brushing her hair into a poor shadow of its former comeliness, cutting elastic to hold up her stockings, thinking she never wanted to wear corsets again. Her father, enormously pleased that she was up and moving, helped her to a seat in the porch, and she sat quietly, very grateful for the sunlight after so much weary tunnelling. Red was tinkering at the plane as usual, and she watched in a kind of wonderment, disbelieving memory. The tent was gone, packed into the seat where she had once sat. Soon Red would be gone and everything would be as it had once been, with the difference that she would never wish it to be otherwise than slow and quiet and for ever peaceful. Inwardly she marvelled at her escape. She did not hate him; he hadn't fooled her. He'd been honest enough in his hard, machine-blind way.

At last he seemed satisfied with the plane. Helmeted, he wooden-skittled across the sun-scorched grass, something in his hand, smoke tufting from his cigarette like a thin substitute for the stuff of clouds.

'Hello, kid.' He stood unsmiling, fixed and permanent in his values as a playing-card. 'How goes it? O.K.?'

Jenny nodded. There wasn't anything she wanted to say to him.

Red sucked at his cigarette, then ground it under-foot. He was wearing, surprisingly, new shoes, cheap, pointed and yellow-shiny; already there was a grease spot on the toe of one. They hadn't a chance, Jenny thought; nothing had a chance with him.

'Heard from a guy this morning who'll go half shares in a real crate. I got to be moving along. Maybe

## SWEET AND LOVELY

I'll be seeing you again sometime. Thought you'd like this, just to remember me by.'

Without thought for its cutting-edge he dropped into her lap the red-painted tin gull, and after it a glinting new little wrist watch. The ticking of the watch was like the beating heart of the gull, Jenny thought amazedly, as if the change of ownership made life possible in the winged metal. Still she hadn't anything to say, so safe had she become from all doing and giving. But Red expected nothing, not even a word of thanks.

'So long, kid,' he grunted, and stumped evenly away.

Ten minutes later, for the last time, the aeroplane skimmed overhead with a tile-shaking clatter. Jenny listened as the engine note died away, pulling silence sighingly about her. She looked at the watch; half-past five . . . queer that it should tell the *right* time. She could hear her father filling a kettle, cussing mildly when water spilt. She put the tin gull down on the bleached wooden seat, the watch upon it, and with the movement peace began again. 'All right, father, I'm coming.'

## WILD IRISH BOY

I HAD to get down from the mountains somehow, in a hurry, too. It wasn't that I'd done anything against the law, only that I'd stayed too long fishing in the best trout stream that ever was and somehow lost one day in my reckoning. I'd checked it over with Johnny Nugent, in whose cottage I'd been staying, and there wasn't any doubt, finally, that we'd mistaken one day for another and lost one completely.

Johnny, double-Irish through and through, didn't see that it mattered. He'd never had to bother about trains and ships and telephones himself and didn't see why anybody else should: 'Sure they're always running, and that's the trouble, for they make you run too!' His pony, unfortunately, was lame, and a wheel of the cart needed fixing, anyway. He'd have lent me his bicycle, only the road was terrible rough, the brakes broken and the tyres so punctured that they had to be pumped every ten minutes of the way. I could have walked, but it was twelve Irish miles and desperate going. Best thing to do would be to hop over to Peter Duggan's and borrow his outfit.

'A rare lad, Peter, a real wild Irish boy, always on the sweat. Clever as a double-barrelled whistle, but not a bit of sense to it anywhere. Mend a gun better than the whole of Dublin and makes the best poteen ye ever drank; sense enough to that too if he didn't drink most of it himself. Always up to something, like an old wild cat, and always trouble on his tail. Last time I saw him he was cutting up bits of timber for toys, wooden horses and things, turning 'em out neat as ninepence and selling 'em by the gross dead easy. But it's too straight a trade to suit him long. How far? Just a bit of a step up and over.'

## WILD IRISH BOY

The step up and over was all of three miles, right over a hill and down into a valley bald as an elephant's neck, and me with rods and tackle which Johnny would have shared had he not been carrying a sackful of bottles for a refill of Peter's spirit. Peter's cottage sat beside a handful of lake like an old loaf beside an empty tin plate. Johnny, however, did not go straight down to the cottage but turned aside to an old scooped quarry hole in the hillside. Inside was a turf-thatched shed with a neat stack of timber outside, a pole lathe under a wing of corrugated iron, a huge grindstone and an anvil side by side like soured man and wife, and wood-chips everywhere among odd bits of metal.

Johnny whistled piercingly as we came to the shed, but no one answered. We looked inside. There were tools everywhere and a chicken or two roosting among them, and on a bench a line of little wooden horses, barrel-bodied, with carved, intelligent heads and tar-brush tails, waiting the bright paint that stood handy. No sign of Peter though.

'He must be down at the house. You wait and let me see.'

Johnny laid his bottles carefully down and plunged away downhill. I picked up one of the wooden horses. It was beautifully made of seasoned ash, weighty, with a metal saddle screwed firmly into place and tiny lengths of chain for reins, and I packed it into my bag without much delay, intending to pay for it when Peter came. But he never came.

I heard voices, saw Johnny talking to a beshawled old woman at the door of the cottage. I gave them ten minutes, then went down the path, not wanting to lose one more day. The old woman stared, hard and grim and grey, while Johnny explained in a low, creaky voice:

## WILD IRISH BOY

"'Tis terrible news she's telling me. Peter dead from a whack from the stallion. Head all smashed. His mother finding him, poor woman, and she visiting him like she always has. . . .'

The old woman did not wait for sympathy but went heavily back into the long, smoke-grimed kitchen. We followed after her, and to me the smell and feel of the place was like sudden old age. A tiny lamp, newly cleaned and filled, burned brightly in its wall niche, and on the table was Peter, covered with a sheet, clean washed and dressed as we saw when the sheet was drawn. Dead right enough, but not by a stallion's hoof it seemed to me, for the wound, over which the thick red hair had been neatly brushed, was long and narrow, deep and ugly.

I didn't like the sight or the mystery either, and I went outside, waiting while they talked, wondering what the mystery was. I heard the old woman's voice once, hard and pitiless: 'Born to trouble and no good in him anywhere. Better dead and no use saying more.' I saw for the first time an ass-cart at the side of the cottage and I went to it, combing the shaggy, dusty hair, restored by the bland sanity of the ass's gaze.

Johnny came sooner than I expected, quiet and grey too, as if misery had soaked into his skin:

'Herself will be going down to town to get things fixed. You can ride with her. I'll be staying. Good or bad 'twouldn't be right to leave him now. Good-bye now.' He saw doubt and a rising question in me and added quickly: 'That stallion always was an ugly one. 'Tis done now and no use arguing.' He reached out a hand to shake: "'Tis a rotten bad end to holiday, and I'm sorry. Come again soon.'

He unhooked the rein and led the ass to the door. The old woman came out of the cottage unblinkingly,

## WILD IRISH BOY

flapping her shawl tight about her like a bat resigned to death. Johnny would have helped her up on to the flat, springless cart but she had no need of him. Sturdily she leaned and humped herself up, pointing a place for me where the balance would be best.

‘You’re a good kind man, Johnny,’ she said. ‘I’ll be back soon.’

She clacked dryly, slapping the makeshift rein on the ass’s rusty flank, and we moved away down the stony road, the hooves of the ass clicking like a broken cog. I tipped a hand to Johnny, settling myself against the bumps.

The journey down seemed endless; it was like a slow mangling inside an ancient clock. I spoke several times to the old woman but she seemed not to hear. Her thin, grey, wrinkled face, sunk in the hood of the black wool shawl, was like a bloodless carving, fixed in patient misery. The ass trotted tirelessly, almost as if it too had some urgent business in town. Once we stopped because a tyre was slipping loose with all the jolting. A rock was useless, and I asked was there a heavy iron of some sort to belt it back? The old woman fumbled at her feet, shoving a heavy length of iron bar across. It was still wet, as if it had lately been in water, but I hardly noticed that in my anxiety to get the wheel fixed. The job was quickly done, however, and we went on. I wiped the grime from my hands and filled a pipe, but there was no pleasure in the smoking.

Dust was thick on us when we at last crossed the bridge and pulled up outside O’Sullivan’s. The old woman slid down, not heeding my thanks, walking heavily across to the carpenter’s shop, while I pushed past the kegs and crates into O’Sullivan’s. O’Sullivan himself was there, shirt-sleeved, straggle-haired and broadly humorous as usual. He filled two glasses with

## WILD IRISH BOY

machine-like precision, refusing payment: 'Sure we don't see you but once in a blue moon!' We had another and the excuse was the same. I gave him some artificial may-flies and he wanted to pay for them, whereupon I was very rude. The train? Sure, he was meeting it himself. He bawled to his wife to mind the shop and was ready. It was the same flapping, broken-hearted lorry that he'd had for years. Still going? Sure, and why not? To which I could think of no suitable answer.

It was necessary to shout above the rattle and roar, but I was glad enough to shout after so much ugly silence. O'Sullivan asked after the fishing and Johnny, too, commenting briefly on Mother Duggan: 'A good strong woman gone sick with worrying over young Peter. A mad cuss of a man he is. . . .'

'Quiet enough now and no more bother to her,' I said. 'A kick from his horse. Johnny's across there now.'

O'Sullivan crossed himself: 'Begod, and is that so? Well, 'tis an end to misery for her, and I can't say I'm sorry.'

We could see the train way down the valley, and O'Sullivan drove all out that I might catch it. There was just time to grab my gear, shout my thanks, bolt on to the platform and into the last carriage but one. A grinning porter slammed the door: 'Sure and ye came at it like a twenty-to-one outsider!'

I see now that there was something providential in my unwilling choice of that last carriage but one. Although I didn't think so at the time. It was empty but for a countrywoman and a child of maybe three years. The child was in a noisy, wailing, fretting mood, and nothing the mother could do could quieten it. I badly wanted peace and quiet, time to lose the bad flavour and recover the good, but the child's ill-humour



## WILD IRISH BOY

seemed permanent and inescapable until I remembered the wooden horse in my bag.

It seemed a perfect opportunity to be rid of it, and I handed it over without regret, the mother thanking me prettily. The wailing stopped. But the child had an awkward, probing mind and was not merely content to hold and admire. It wrenched and pulled, loosening metal trappings, until at last a finger was pierced. Whereupon it scowled and howled once more and slung the horse mightily out of the window. The train was rounding a curve and I saw the horse fall. As it touched ground there was a violent explosion.

The mother stared at me alarmedly and I lied clumsily: 'It must have hit some blasting powder or something of the sort.' She didn't believe me and I couldn't blame her. Fortunately she had her hands and mind full with the peevish child, and I was left in a kind of astonished peace, knowing the depth of Peter's cunning, glad that it was ended, sure now that his death was no accident. I remembered the clean-washed iron bar and the old woman, the harsh, righteous strength of her, and, in the remembering, the mystery was gone.

## PARADISE LOST

THAT was the name daubed incongruously on her counter, the only visible blemish; but she had not always been called the *Paradise Lost* for chisel marks showed where an original name, carved deeply in the wood, had been chipped and scooped away. A puzzling name for so beautiful a boat, it seemed to me. She was small, decked and cabined, but perfectly shaped, made so by long experience of paradise one would have said. Sweetly, with all the pride and assurance of a snow-white bird, she rode at anchor and the harbour seemed a richer place while she was there.

All evening I leaned upon the salt-bitten rails and watched her lifting to the rising tide, charmed by her racing lines, imagining paradise and the boat an arrow-head which could not miss. Every now and then she seemed to look at herself in the dark shining water and she'd give a pleased little shrug as it were and nod a bit, stilling again to peaceful reverie, listening perhaps to the bullying gossip of gulls or the grinding hum of the hill-perched town, or waiting, it might be, for the step of her owner and release from hampering chains.

Standing there, enviously absorbed, I wondered a little on her owner, thinking that he should be young and merry with the best of youth, confident but not cocksure, lean and muscular and with a saving touch of poetic vision in him. Of course I guessed that he might have none of these qualities but in the warm summer dusk idealism was easy and natural. The dinghy of the *Paradise Lost* waited at the foot of the green-weeded steps, tugging lazily in time with the lapping water and in curiosity I waited too, hoping for a miraculous invitation, one which would change the

## PARADISE LOST

way of my life, defeat the dullness which had somehow crept into it. Offered a passage in such a thoroughbred I would let nothing hinder me.

Day sank slowly away as if it had drained through the holes of a sieve, only a few poor glinting crystals remaining, scattered over the town and harbour. Seaward a pair of ruby lights glowed unwinkingly like the eyes of a cat which might well have been the true pilot of the dusk, waiting to guide it stealthily over the world. At times the smell of shag came strongly, laced with a wispy smell of fish, and once I identified the reek of burnt brandy although the source remained a mystery. The hauling of an anchor chain suggested the winding of a clock, the beginning of a new sort of time. Once two boys passed, eating live shrimps from an old bucket with loud appetite, cursing amiably when they wriggled and jerked under their fingers, one of them pausing in a kind of inspiration to cut with a piece of shell an apple from an advertisement pasted on a board, rambling on with the false fruit pinned safely to his ragged jersey. A rat squeaked and bolted over a sheeted pile of cargo from the Islands and, as if this were a sufficient cause, a single star sparkled like a tiny, sudden flaw in the immense green smoked bowl of the sky.

For a long time I watched some oranges floating and bumping gently against the *Paradise Lost* like the red heads of inquisitive swimmers; or perhaps, I thought, the fruit recognized a native smell about the travelled hull. Absurd to credit oranges with homesickness yet the thought seemed quite reasonable in my mood of happy expectancy. Sounds came clearly in the stillness, rich with the quality of gifts. Half-amusedly I heard heavy, uncertain footsteps approaching across the cobbles but was unprepared for the close coming of a drunken figure. Breathing heavily the newcomer

## PARADISE LOST

peered suspiciously at me, tipped back the peaked cap which had become a perplexing burden to him and lurched suddenly down the stone steps. Doubting that this could be the owner of the *Paradise Lost*, this weary-faced, stooping, middle-aged grocerman, I watched impatiently, gulping disgustedly when I saw his hand reach for the painter of the dinghy. He might, however, have made a mistake, be simply borrowing the dinghy for some stupid excursion. He was muttering windily to himself as he pulled the dinghy alongside. Stepping clumsily, without a handhold, he missed the shallow, bobbing boat by a necessary inch, hung foolishly for a moment and flopped face downwards into the harbour, splashing and sinking abruptly so that but for the evidence of the dinghy dancing on its rope, his coming and passing might have been no more than a breath of fever across the calm.

It happens that I am not at all heroic by nature. I prefer always to work out the right and safe procedure rather than to act on impulse. So that I did not dive straightway from the top. An immediate thought was that he would be better off dead, that then the *Paradise Lost* would have the chance of new, redeeming ownership. I even thought that I might buy her for the song which was about all I could afford, sail her south into a heart-warming paradise.

Then I thought that his death would be on my mind for the rest of my life, an ugly, sleep-breaking burden, and down the steps I went, hauling the dinghy close, looking beyond the floating cap. Fortunately he rose again within easy reach of the steps and all I had to do was grab the slack of his jacket and lift him bit by bit on to the steps. He was badly water-logged but a methodical jerking and punching set him gasping and retching again and a more sorry sight I've never seen.

## PARADISE LOST

He looked like a badly mauled doll, something rejected by death as being unworthy of its gift of everlasting peace.

There was a bottle of brandy in his pocket and I tipped some down his throat before tossing the bottle away. His grey hair looked like a starfish perched on his skull, and his long melancholy face had a curious, white-scorched look, the dripping water like a painful melting of flesh. There was stinking, crawling mud in his clenched hands, mud scooped unaccountably from the harbour bed, and I spent minutes washing them clean, washing away the stamp of death as it seemed.

No one had noticed the accident. The dusk was undisturbed. I thought of hauling him to the top and finding a doctor, but he looked like lead. If I left him there he might flop in again. Easy enough to raise a shout for help but beauty had suffered enough and there seemed no sense in attracting a noisy audience. Better to keep the whole shabby business close. The night was warm and it was unlikely that he would take a chill. He was breathing better now, blinking and puking abundantly, thoroughly sobered, although it was not for many minutes that he was able to talk.

His first words were the saddest I've ever heard: 'A pity you didn't let me go.'

'Couldn't expect me to do that!' I gave him a handkerchief to dry his face.

'I suppose not, although it would have been full circle if you had.'

'Nonsense! I guess you're the owner of the *Paradise Lost*?'

He nodded wearily, ashamedly: 'I suppose you've got a pretty poor opinion of me, rolling home that way. But then it always happens in this port. I'm a damned morbid fool to come.'

## PARADISE LOST

'You must be if it only happens here and you've all the world to roam over.'

'Right enough. I'd have said the same at your age. But there's a lot you don't understand.'

'More nonsense! Age doesn't matter when you own a boat like that.'

'No?' He looked across to where the *Paradise Lost* rode dimly, serenely, on black-silver water.

'A queer name for such a beauty.'

He spat miserably: 'Maybe, but it's true of her and me. A bit bitter perhaps but true enough. She wasn't always called that; she doesn't deserve it, even though she was partly to blame. I built her myself, cheerfully, if you'll believe me, a long time ago. I was going to do wonders with her. Everything of the best. I knew exactly what I wanted for all coasts and weathers. I've a small income you see, and I worked it out that a boat would be cheap and ideal to live on. See the world and all that sort of thing. Sailing is in the family.'

'First off I thought I'd work her alone and I rigged her accordingly, but after a trip or two it got a bit lonely. Nothing to do but sit and think between-whiles and not much to think about either if your bread's assured. I was never much of a hand for books; I like things straight from the tap if you understand me. I wanted flesh and blood and a song in the morning.'

'Once a man gets like that something must be done about it. So I looked about for someone else in need of quiet company. But there wasn't a soul who cared to join me. Maybe I was a bit shy, a bit too particular, anyway I came down the coast with plenty of hope and put in here one afternoon, trotting the town for a likely mate. I was back before dark, disappointed and surly as the devil. I nearly knocked a girl over as I came down these very steps and I wasn't drunk that time.'

## PARADISE LOST

She was leaning over the rail and it wasn't till later that I realized she was looking at my boat, admiring her. I tried to remember what she looked like but I'd become so flat-minded that I could only remember girl and no shape.

'Anyway she was there again the next afternoon, just leaning contentedly, looking at that boat of mine. That was pleasant to begin with, that she should like my work, but after I'd had a good look at her I felt my luck was turning. I knew then what was wrong with me, what I really wanted. Beautiful she was, with a lovely, laughing-serious face and heavy, cornsilk hair, and there was a swimming grace about her body that made my own ideas of beauty seem clumsy.

'After a while I puffed up courage and went across and had a talk with her. She was shy but we talked about the boat and there wasn't much she didn't know about it. Her father had been a boat-builder. He'd just died and she'd plenty of time on her hands now that there was no housekeeping to be done. It did her good, she said, to find that someone had the same ideas as her father, made it seem that the thinking part of him wasn't dead after all. I didn't dare to ask what she was going to do with herself now for suddenly I saw my whole life made calm and ordered. If she would only marry me we could sail away together, find goodness where we chose.

'I invited her to look over the boat and she thought she'd like to. No hesitation. Just a quick smiling yes. So I rowed across and we spent the hour till dark looking from stem to stern and when I'd shown her all my ideas I thought of coffee to delay her going, give me a chance to speak my mind, offer marriage, though I was doubtful whether she'd be wanting such a rusty dumber as I was. I made her feel the comfort of my swing chair

## PARADISE LOST

down in the cabin while I hopped about with pot and cups and I think then for the first time my boat seemed really complete.

‘And then it happened. The door bumped shut after me, quite by accident you understand, and as I passed behind her a button of my jacket caught in her hair, wrenching it painfully, and she must have thought suddenly, like someone waking, that I’d got her on the boat just to do her harm, you know what I mean. She pulled away in stark, staring horror, and bolted up on deck, not listening to me at all. I went after her and when she saw me coming she gave a gasp and jumped overboard. I was sure she could swim. I called and then I jumped in after her, but I couldn’t find her. It was dark you see. And then I bumped into a steel hull and someone lugged me out more dead than alive. It was three days before I could move about again and then I heard that they’d found her at low tide, lying dead on the mud.

‘That’s all. It was just like that and I can’t forget it, why the only person in the whole world necessary to me should be snatched away. It’s got right inside me and there’s nothing I want to do now. I could see all sorts of loveliness beginning and then someone stamps upon it all. What real chance of happiness do we stand if that’s the way God’s mind works?’

I could feel the pain and bitterness in him but there was no pity in my heart. Life was what one made it, sweet or sour. I told him so but his mind had stiffened into a half-death.

‘Maybe if I could find a shipmate and get right out of it,’ he wavered. ‘I suppose you wouldn’t care to join me?’

For an instant I thought of southern seas, colour and sunlight, but to reach them in the *Paradise Lost* would



## PARADISE LOST

be like wearing a dead man's clothes. The boat was soured for me; beauty had died and I must look elsewhere. Very decidedly I shook my head.

'No? I thought not. That's what they all say, as if they don't believe me,' he added meanly: 'Ah, well, it can't be helped.'

He climbed heavily into the dinghy, calling a lame good night and thanks for my rescue.

'If you should hear of anyone interested let me know,' he said.

But I did not answer.

## GLORY BOY

FISHING was over for another year and Frankie Dolan was rowing me back across the sun-speckled lough to the railway, his boat leaking hissingly as usual so that I had to be baling constantly. Frankie himself looked near enough the same as when we'd made the first trip ten years back; same amazingly patched clothes, enormous crumpled boots and broken-peaked cap, and the same trouble on his gentle, generous mind.

Fifty times he'd promised the boat a coat of paint, although it needed much more than paint, but always there was another use for the little money he made. It was so now. There was a fine calf roped in the straw-filled stem of the boat, market-ripe and ready, but I could tell by Frankie's weary silence that there'd be nothing to spare for paint or anything else when he'd sent a pound or two to his wild-catting brother in America.

'Mike in trouble again, is it?' I knew he'd intended to rear the calf himself.

Frankie nodded.

"Tis Mike himself should be sending you money with all his opportunities for making it.'

'I know, I know, but that's the way it is. Micky always was a glory boy. Brains enough to break the back of an ass, but it's no good they are. Strong as a brewer's horse, too. Always in trouble, but no blame to him. 'Tis just the way he was put together. I was never telling you the trick that took him away, the thundering chance he had to make himself big?'

"Tis a long time gone now and Micky himself only a big lump of a lad, good for nothing but laying a bet or selling pot liquor after dark. Well, a sneezy old American travelling man came hopping to the house

## GLORY BOY

one day, wanting a hand with a bit of a job. He was what ye'd be calling a geologist; you know, hunting bits of rock and finding out what caused 'em. 'Twas just his pleasure to be doing it. He'd a big old leather bag and he got Micky to go chasing over the mountains with him, gathering all the bits he knocked off with his little hammer.

'They filled up the bag all right and Micky sweated home with it. He got ten shillings for all the labour and the promise of ten more if he'd carry the bag across to Castlebrophy the day after. The American was in a tearing hurry, y'see, to be sailing home. We'd no good horse then and Micky had to be carrying the bag. He didn't like the work at all. Such a mucky lot of old rock that you could pick up anywhere, he was telling himself. So he shoots the lot out in a corner of a field, carries the empty bag and fills up again from a road dump just beside the town. Gets his money all right and the American goes off fullblown and happy in McAfferty's old car for Galway city.

'You wouldn't be knowing McAfferty's car. It was a rare old snatchy beast and that time was the death of it. The steering came to pieces on the steep bit over by the sainty cross. McAfferty shoved the American out, jumped himself, and the car went galloping on over the edge and drowned itself in sixty feet of water.

'The American was glad to have his life saved, but terrible sad to lose his old bag of rocks. He had to be hurrying to catch his boat, but he left word to Micky to know if he could be getting some more rocks for him, the same as before. Micky smelt some more money, and he wrote off saying it would take time remembering all the rocks they'd chipped, but he'd do it. And he just went and raked up the bits he'd tipped out, wrapped and packed 'em all nicely and sent 'em off. Easy,

## GLORY BOY

begob! He left out one or two and put in some odd ones he busted off the wall just to make it look right and the American was as pleased as a bouncing ball. Sent money for clothes and a ticket to America; said he could use Micky's brain in his business, said he wouldn't have thought it possible for anyone to go over the ground so well. Micky went too, but it did him no good. He's just a glory boy and there's no holding him when there's a good time spitting handy.'

Frankie swore at the calf for no reason at all, pulling strongly to avoid a jutting rock. We were nearing the stone jetty. I looked back across the lough, wanting a lasting memory of it all. The breezes were lifting small patches of water into scaly, flashing life so that it seemed as if monstrous fish were rolling lazily. Frankie's little whitewashed cottage looked no bigger than a sheep lost on the green point, and, beyond, the mountains bulked greenly, grey-headed as if all the clouds of winter had worn them to the bone in their blustering passing. Frankie looked back, too, half-hating, half-loving, pinching labour and rarer, peaceful benefits mixed in his mind. He was sad and lonely at my going.

"'Twould be better if you were married, Frankie.'

'I know, but there 'tis. Can't ask a woman to share half of nothing.' He looked miserably at the calf: 'Come on, man, else the creature'll be drowned in all the water we've picked up.' All explanation was in his voice. Family needs came first. Always the glory boy must be succoured.

Together we lifted the calf ashore, pulling the boat high. We untied the calf and it skipped a bit to be free. Then Frankie led it along the open road, over the bridge into half-awake Main Street, on into Deasey's yard, tying it to a ring. The dealing would come later. Now it was a drink we both needed and we turned in

## GLORY BOY

among the ironware and groceries to the bar where Deasey himself, round and genial, was already working on a bottle.

'Saw you coming,' he said in welcome. 'Good fishing? That's what I like to hear. Done you good, too, rubbed out a wrinkle or two. Brought the calf I see, Frankie, a good 'un, though the market's terrible bad. Been wanting to see you. Couple of letters for you, both American.'

'Two more! Why, 'tis only a short bit since the last!' Frankie took a quick long drink before handling the letters. He didn't like the look of them. 'More trouble,' he said gloomily and slid them across to me. 'You read and tell me. It won't sound so bad that way.'

I found a knife and slit one envelope neatly. There wasn't much to read, simply that a Doctor McCready regretted to inform Mr. Frank Dolan that his brother Michael had died on the fourteenth. Everything had been taken care of and more details would follow.

'Mike's dead, Frankie.' It seemed better to get it over quickly.

'Dead!' Frankie stared unbelievably. Deasey filled his glass sympathetically. Frankie hadn't anything more to say, only took the letter and read and re-read it as if it were news from heaven itself. After five minutes he remembered the second letter: 'What's the other one say?'

The other letter — it was like something snatched back out of time — was from Mike himself, written in a neat, feathering hand at his request.

Dear Frankie,

This is just to say good-bye. I am sorry indeed not to be seeing you again, but they tell me I'm done for. You've been good, Frankie, and I've been no good, worse luck for you. My last job wasn't what I was telling you. I was bouncer in a drinking joint. That

## GLORY BOY

is how it happened. One night there was a stick-up. I didn't like it. I took a chance and grabbed the gunner. He plugged me, but I held him and knocked him cold, which is what no one else had been able to do. They say I'm a hero, but don't you believe it, Frankie. I just didn't like the man. My nurse is writing this. She wants to put it into nice words, but I said you'd like it better my way. She says I must close now.

So long, Frankie, boy.

P.S. — I forgot to say there was a reward for grabbing the guy with the gun. Two thousand dollars which they will send on to you. His name was Tony Maxetos. He was white and thin like a whipped candle, no good without a gun. Nurse says she'll send the newspapers on and you'll see.

It took many minutes for Frankie to understand completely. Then he said with a stiff, weepy little smile: 'We'll drink to Micky, Mister Deasey, if y'please.' We drank silently, then stood awkwardly, Deasey and I waiting decently for grief to be still. It was the wailing of the calf in the yard that brought Frankie to life once more. He blinked apologetically:

'I'll not be selling the calf after all, Mister Deasey, unless ye've made an arrangement already. And I'll be wanting some paint.'

Deasey waved away the matter of the calf and handed down a dusty card of colours: 'Anything ye fancy, Frankie, I'll be glad to get.'

Frankie looked from colour to colour uncertainly. Then a new, relieving thought came to him: 'Begod, and I'm thinking there's a lot I'll be wanting, but I'll be wanting advice first, if y'understand me. If ye should happen to see Mary Feeney, Mister Deasey, tell her I'm painting the boat, and which colour would she admire best?...

## KILL OR CURE

IN a little more than a month after the death of her husband old Alice Tarty had wilted from a sturdy, self-reliant dame to a weak, aimless ghost, dying too, though not from any illness of the flesh, but simply because she had no desire to live. Life had lost all taste and colour, and the beauty of early autumn was no more than flapping rags and water gabble to her weary senses.

The old familiar routine of days, quick and slow, sad and merry, tuneful always while Joe was there, was broken, Joe gone and herself left standing like a useless, splintered stump. Cottage empty, no need to wake, to cook, to sew, to plan little pleasures for them both. No place or need for her any more, nothing left but a lonely waiting for peace, for nothingness.

Death had passed close to them before, but without souring either. Joe, bluntly philosophical, without an enemy, had often said that when his time came he'd go in pride, without scrooping or wailing. He didn't believe in any hereafter. Life and heaven was here and now and the wise ones knew it, found honey where they could. Count the stars and only a fool would believe that we mattered in death any more than in life.

He had died easily, sad for Alice, but careless for himself. Alice, dumbly alone, beyond tears, all warmth and courage gone with him, sat now, wishing death for herself, escape from thorny memory.

Day after day she sat in the sloping garden back of her daughter's cottage, quiet and still, caged in the shade of a twisted quince tree that was somehow like the burnt-out wreck of proud faith, unwarmed by sun or kindly word, her scarred hands folded in her lap like chopped roots, her knees laxly spread, her heavy black

boots jutting beyond the dragging hem of her serge skirt, warped and unpolished, sad as hooves on a knacker's tail-board.

Nell, her daughter, plain-minded and very practical, had no patience left for her. The old man had to go some time, like the rest of us, and life was too short to waste in dull grief. Worse for him than for them, anyway, to be missing such a grand September. For a week she had tried to badger her mother back into life; then, when bright word, hard word and all her prodding failed, she shrugged and gave it up, only muttering sometimes that some folk didn't know when they were well off.

Only Nell's own child Tilly remained interested in the old lady. Tilly was thin, twiggy almost, freckled, lank-haired and snatch-handed, with pale, unwinking serenely inquisitive eyes that seemed to slip into one's mind like a rifling knife into a money box; no answer satisfied her, questions hatching pell-mell in her cold persevering mind, uncomfortable, fish-slipping questions uttered in a tumbling bird-squawk of a voice.

From a distance she studied the old lady, determined, it seemed, to fathom the workings of old age for herself, by imitation, since questions brought no satisfying answer. She sat, at a distance, in exactly the same attitude as Alice, with quick, occasional glances to see that she was indeed exactly right. Hour after hour she sat solemnly, hands folded, shoulders dropped, waiting for meaning, or perhaps just pleased that she was doing it so well. She even borrowed a bonnet and shawl and an old horse rug for skirt, and because her own feet hung unconvincingly, a pair of her mother's boots to place under.

For days Alice did not notice. Then, waking one morning to Nell's call, she saw the child, utterly still



## KILL OR CURE

and absorbed, dwarfed old age, saw herself, empty, outside life, even a little absurd. She was hurt. She worried about it, thinking how best to defeat Tilly, saying nothing, only bringing a Bible with her next time she sat, reading with a tiny, self-righteous sense of triumph.

But Tilly, although she could not read, was not disturbed, indeed was pleased at a variation in the game. She too brought a book—it was called 999 *Ways of Making Money*; the thousandth way must have been the making and selling of the book—bending low, her lips moving as did the old lady's, and with as little meaning as Alice had to admit. For, somehow, she could not read the foxed pages; the tale was too cold, hung in chains, and, besides, flies came and walked distractingly, bees too, as if they mistook the foxings for the brown ghosts of flowers.

Watching their busy crawl, Alice remembered how patient Joe had been with his bees, thoughtful for their comfort so that they recognized his gentle touch and were not angered. Joe had drunk some of his own twenty-year-old mead before he died and the flavour and knowledge behind the making of that flavour had made him smile faintly.

It had been a good year for the bees, well-sunned and watered too, so that flowers of every sort had bloomed early and late in rare abundance, and the bees had willingly worked themselves to death, as if aware that they only could save something of this sweetness from the wet, extinguishing hand of winter. Alice quite forgot her Bible, looking towards the hives in the lower garden.

Joe's stocks had been brought there after dark in the carrier's van with the few bits of things she had kept to furnish a room for herself. There was comfort in the

thought that some memory of him lived on in the bees. She shut her Bible, straightened her shawl, and walked slowly down the path towards the hives. Grass grew between the bricks of the path. She must ask Nell for boiling water next wash-day, pour it between the bricks. Joe hated furred paths, as he called them.

She stood for a long time by the hives that morning, heartened by the methodical busyness of the bees. No doubt or thought of waste or selfishness seemed to touch them, no memory either, perhaps. She carried a faintly salted pan of water near to the hives, hunting for a pebble or two for foothold for the bees, bending and searching with difficulty, ridiculously stiff but determined, unwilling to ask Tilly's help.

Then she noticed, for the first time, the clear print of a hand upon a half-painted hive, Joe's hand. He must have rested heavily upon it for support through one of his swimmy turns. A strong, square hand, how well she knew it. He had caught her with it the day they first met when the market van swayed dangerously, saved broken bones at least. And, since then, the hand had given her everything, joy and unfailing comfort, had worked and played too, tirelessly. Alice sat down quickly, faintingly, in an agony of loss.

After an anguished night she stayed abed beyond her usual hour the next morning, stiff and cold, unwilling to move again, until she saw Tilly watching her through the window, squinting determinedly through the sea-green glass, the sun and shining life behind her so that Alice felt herself drowned in the dimness of the drab little room, a sprawling curiosity. For a little while she lay quiet, pretending sleep, but Tilly stared pitilessly on. Her mother called and stones clattered and Alice heard a bird-sudden question:

'What's wrong with Gran, Mum?'

## KILL OR CURE

'Nothing as I know of.'

'Then why . . . ?'

'Oh, be quiet, child. When you're as old as she is, you'll know.'

'Yes, but . . .'

'She just don't care, that's all. Now run along.'

And back Tilly came to the window, wide eyed, more curious than ever. Alice positively itched under her inquisitive gaze. She thought of giving her a penny to go away and, unconcernedly as she could, got out of bed to look for her purse. But there were only useless keys and buttons in the purse; she had quite forgotten money and its worth through these last weeks. It seemed silly to get back into bed after so much scurrying so she dressed and went into the kitchen. Tilly was there before her, questioning urgently:

'Why don't you care?'

Nell cuffed her daughter lightly: 'Now you get along. The kettle won't be a minute, Ma.'

Alice wanted to explain, to ask for a penny for Tilly, to stop her staring. But Nell was busy, kneading dough, a fine figure, humming a forthright song, not giving a damn even though she was expecting another child before the month was out. Alice knew what Nell would say about pence to stop staring, so she said nothing, only drank her tea, took her cup to the sink and washed and dried it, going afterwards out into the garden to the privy, shutting herself in, safe from Tilly's gaze, brooding grimly, reaching back to Joe and forwards to Nell, finding no place for herself, lost in a waking nightmare.

At first, the smoke wisping thinly between the ancient weatherboards had seemed but a part of that nightmare. Then she began to cough, waking to a thorny crackling. Smoke was pluming now through

## KILL OR CURE

seams and knotholes and it was as if the place were being wrapped unmethodically in fine tissue. Alice coughed and blinked. A mouse bolted in panic and flame skewered suddenly very close. Alice came hastily alive, forgetting all dignity and despair, wrenching open the door, scampering noisily to safety. A pile of old straw against the privy wall was blazing strongly, the privy itself smoking and smouldering, and there was Tilly, matchbox still in hand, capering and crowing triumphantly.

'You *do* care! You *do* care!'

Alice tidied herself primly, taking the matches from the gleeful Tilly, tempted to clump, but vaguely realizing the service she had done. Nell came running and Tilly bolted. Nell swore a lot, but between them they raked and doused the flames.

'It's that brat, Till. God only knows where she gets her ideas from. Just wait until I lay hands on her!'

Tilly watched prudently from a corner of the house while Alice placated her angry daughter.

' 'Tis the nature of children to do such things after all. Don't you remember the time you soaked the parson's hat in paraffin because he wouldn't believe in your miracle, and the way it popped into flames when he passed the candle?'

Nell had quite forgotten but now she remembered, laughing uproariously, Alice with her. Now that she was able to laugh again Alice wanted to cry too, with relief, but she didn't. She shared a pot of tea with the reminiscent Nell, then took up a basket of cabbage plants from the porch where young Joe had dropped them the night before, too tired to plant them there and then.

The day was mild and very fair, colours bursting rich in the sun, slow, massed clouds shadow-marching

## KILL OR CURE

across the earth like gentle animals finding all pasture good. They were felling an oak down the lane, the crisp, regular thump of axes sounding like the tick of a giant clock across the stillness. Time was moving again. Eleven o'clock and nothing done. Alice found a trowel and, striking a line across newly turned ground, began planting the cabbages as she had so often done before when Joe was benecked with work.

Tilly watched interestedly, idling cautiously to the other end of the row, kneeling in imitation, pretending to plant.

Alice straightened herself, shrugging the stiffness from her bones, offering a plant. But Tilly shook her head warily: 'Mum won't let me.'

'Nonsense, child. If you do as I do she'll be pleased.'

Tilly looked doubtful, edging nearer.

'Look now, like this.'

Tilly stared gapingly from Alice to the plant, kneeling soberly. No one had ever bothered to explain anything gently to her before. 'Like this?'

'That's it . . . very carefully because it hurts if you break the roots.'

With pursed lips and swinging hair Tilly planted the cabbage, looking to Alice for approval.

'Good.' Alice gave her more plants and Tilly took them as if they were little children, smiling gratefully, scooping busily, little blessings flowing from lips and fingers as she worked.

Alice smiled too, remembering the burning privy. A good, definite way of finding out how much one cared. As if guessing her thoughts Tilly asked suddenly: 'Why didn't you care, Gran?'

'I don't know, child.' Alice groped for explanation, for words to convey heartache, no warmth or footing,

## KILL OR CURE

a stripping after comfort, loss of love well known, but Tilly spoke first, bird-sudden, sympathetically.

‘Like after toothache?’

Alice nodded gratefully, and Tilly, satisfied, nodded too, understandingly, perfectly satisfied, all interest centred now on the planting, on this babying of green things which would die or not as she mothered them.

Alice knelt again, safe and sound, hot-faced at her escape, deeply amused. Yet grief was like that. Joe would have understood, even the tooth bit. And, thinking of teeth, she remembered the old set of his with the gold plates; sold it would amply pay for Nell’s lying in — new teeth for old — Joe would have liked that too.

## SUCCOUR FOR BARNABAS

EVEN now I can remember how the word thrilled me at the time, although I was then but six years old. Succour! We *must* succour Barnabas, Barnabas being the mule of Jenner Bold, the taciturn and, as we saw it, murderously cruel driver of a milk float which stopped in the lane each morning to collect two shining cans of cream from the nearby farm. Unfailingly Jenner thrashed the weary mule into motion with a long, whistling-thin stick, and it was this methodical act which moved my impulsive Irish cousin Mary to decision.

'We *must* succour Barnabas,' she declared, her freckled hands clenched and jaw thrust forward, although how it was to be done remained for a long time an anxious mystery and the subject of many secret meetings in the cave among the knotted roots of an enormous beech tree.

At that time our summer holidays were always spent in an old thatched-roofed railway carriage set in an orchard within sight of the Downs, a graceful ark of a place, full of an atmosphere of perpetual holiday. A spring cart from the farm, driven by circus-minded Johnny Lord, met us at the appropriately rose-bowered station and we piled merrily aboard with the help of an amazingly genial stationmaster, my mother and my father, my sisters and myself, with, usually, a cousin or two, awkward as unfastened safety-pins, all of us laden with wicker baskets and untidy brown-papered parcels. At sight of us Johnny, whose entire possessions could have been folded comfortably away in a red silk handkerchief, would scratch his rusty nape very deliberately. 'You 'ant forgotten nothing nowhere, the well, or the weathercock, or something?'

## SUCCOUR FOR BARNABAS

The hour must have varied, but it seems now that we always arrived at the Hut when it was at its mellow, sleepy best, shut-eyed and peeling ripe with sunlight, but with the shadows reaching as if to cage the first coolness of evening. Neither afternoon nor evening, but cow-time as we compromised, for we were sure to meet cows in the lane, a score or more, ambling slowly in their own paths in and out of the overgrown hedges, brisk-tailed against the flies, but placid and sleek as if they had just come from the well-spring of summer itself.

Come to the Hut we tumbled off like apples from a shaken bough, bolting riotously through the grinning white gate and away into the incredibly lush orchard to see if special seeds had sprouted, if flint hoards and bark tents had been disturbed and if the rabbits were as plentiful, leaving my father to open doors and light an unnecessary fire of twigs and logs in the wide red-brick fireplace at the end of the Hut and study the few circulars and letters scattered on the mat. Frowning a little my mother unlocked trunks and hung blankets to air, crushing spiders determinedly with the back of a hair-brush and clapping her hands as warning to a mouse chippering in the long attic, eyeing my father half-amusedly, half in irritation as he smoked so comfortably and mended again the ancient bellows, off-handedly suggesting the need for water from the farm and for eggs and milk and butter. My father would appear unnecessarily dense and detached, enjoying deeply the smoky, apple-flavoured smell of the Hut, pottering with the fire, and presently, when my mother was near to sharpness, Johnny Lord would appear, his enormous crumpled boots chipping new rednesses from the brick path, trundling a brimming wheel-barrel, a basket of eggs and butter slipped over one



## SUCCOUR FOR BARNABAS

bleached handle and a cream can — one, perhaps, which Jenner Bold had handled no more than a day back — full of milk on the other. My father would wink then at my mother, slowly and richly, and when Johnny was gone, pleased as Punch with a gift of a nutty rope of tobacco, he'd slip an arm placatingly through hers, leading her in happy walk in search of us.

Supper, later, was a meal made hilarious by the pretence that we were in a travelling railway carriage bound for some rainbow's end of my father's imagining. Cups of milk were balanced everywhere and cake crumbs fell without reproof. We might even sit on or under the table if we chose for, as my father said, this was holiday. Perhaps to help the illusion of a train he stoked a splendid fire which filled the low-ceilinged many-windowed room with leaping light and rather more warmth than was necessary, so that every door must be opened and every window dropped for the sake of coolness. Irresistibly attracted, ghost-swift moths flickered bewilderingly about us, queer blown blossoms which might have been born of the flames. Sometimes a cockchafer bulleted through in an 'All tickets, please' manner, and once, I remember, a bat entered in chase of a moth, disturbing as a seed of nightmare.

Outside, the massed elders and wild roses were like pearly windowed palaces mushrooming in the stillness, the glow-worms beneath become the lanterns of watchful guards. Upon entering the Hut each of us had grabbed from the mantel a coveted one of the quaint, treasured books peculiar to the place, delightfully pompous and pleasing works to us all because we already knew so much more than they contained. Most of them were dated round about 1820 and the morocco binding dusted off in one's hands. But we loved them, and now, on this first evening, we read loudly together

in unholy chorus; rookery stews my father called them wryly, these mixed readings from *Theodore, or The Crusaders, Short Stories in Words of Two Syllables, Improved Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Uncle William in the British Metropolis, or The Fashionable Letter Writer, with Elegant Plates.*

My mother would be sewing and my father smoking one of the churchwardens from the mantel rack, one slipper scorching on the hearth. For a while they suffered the tumult, and then my father, at a nod from my mother, would become Town Crier, with tea-cosy for hat, daunting us with his cry: 'Oyez! Oyez!' then, quietly, a mouse following an elephant: 'Bedtime!'

So we went, each one to his bunk against the smoke-pickled mahogany panelling at the further end of the Hut, the solitary candle standing in a home-baked clay stick, in the base of which was the imprint of all our thumbs. A chorus of 'Good nights' and the heavy red curtains were drawn. For a while we would hear the quiet voices of my mother and father like the wash of tiny waves on a sandy shore. The timbers of the Hut would creak a little as if it were bracing itself for our visit and a nightingale or two would pipe from the thicket. Then sleep, a glowing absence, a riding of the spirit on the soft half-darkness of the June night, and this though the horsehair-stuffed and covered mattresses were uncommonly hard.

Daybreak, with its star-washed, reviving wind which never failed to move the larks to an inspired frenzy of song, found us responsive. The mind peeped in advance of the eye. The light increased, revealing the world in all its dewy freshness with a kind of open-armed pride. The wrens in the thatch twittered and bustled, sending scraps of straw spinning downwards, pure gold in the risen sun. We whispered as we

## SUCCOUR FOR BARNABAS

dressed as to who should go first through the window to help the others. But my father had heard and was outside before us, hushing us lest we wake my mother, lifting us down, quick with some plan to keep us amused and busy out of earshot.

The later, official morning began with a perfunctory wash in rain water in which, usually, queer things floated. Then, while breakfast was on the way, if we chose, and we always did, for the farmyard was an enchanting place, we were each given a small enamel jug for milk, and off we'd straggle along the path under the laurels, indignant if anyone took a short cut through the hedge. Through the white gate with its ridiculous tinkling bell whose note was like a weak echo of spoons, across the lane under the oaks and into the nettled approach to the farmyard proper.

But sometimes we stopped inside our own white gate and peered through at Barnabas and the waiting milk float in the lane, chilled by the sight of the long, thin whip-stick wedged in a tarnished rail. We would whisper fervent condolences to the sad, shiver-skinned animal, but it was too dejected even to heed us. We looked for weals on its flanks, shrinking backwards into the shrubbery as Jenner Bold came clumping back with the two shining cans of cream.

He was a great pollarded stump of a man, stooped as if there were an intolerable weight in his head dragging him everlastingly downwards. His face was sunken and fierce whiskered, and his eyes, we decided, were like church nails. His clothes moved stiffly with him, not comfortably, and he wore always, rain or shine, a shabby bowler hat which reminded us again of the pieces of tin so often nailed upon a post to prevent rot, and which, in itself, was a warning to us who rarely wore hats. His trousers, too, were always

## SUCCOUR FOR BARNABAS

tied at the bottoms with twine as if he feared the run of mice, this binding adding enormously to the apparent size of his feet. Trousers untied and hat lost, he would not last a day, we always felt.

Come to the float he would slam the cans aboard and step up beside them, reaching for whip and rein. No kindly word was ever spoken; we did not know then that mules are often deaf to kindness. Only the whip fell slashingly, again and again with an unforgettable, dying-pig sound. For a moment the dumb battle was fought, then Barnabas flapped his great ears as one might shrug and plodded patiently away.

Morning after morning we saw the same thing happen that particular summer and the days were soured for us, drained of all warmth and happiness, the nights, too, being marred by ugly dreams. We could not explain very clearly why we were so saddened. It was almost as if here was cause given us to see dimly and fear the end of our own small and merry kingdom, so secure till now. The love of our parents gone we might even be driven so. That was the way the eldest among us reasoned, but I myself was far from such moral logic. I was simply hurt by Barnabas's plight and wanted the hurt removed. If I never saw Barnabas again the hurt would go just the same, but while he suffered before our eyes we suffered too, curiously, for we often ill-treated living things ourselves without a pang. But then there was a certain innocence about our cruelty, a kind of testing of stresses, a searching and a reaching towards other kinds of life with a wish to identify all life with our own. One word from a fly in our own language and we should never have killed another. But, as it was, we killed and felt that they were withholding recognition of our godliness. Just as Barnabas was. But we never saw it that way. We

## SUCCOUR FOR BARNABAS

expected wisdom of age; Jenner should have known better. Watching, we were crippled, hurt in a new way. This was something different, a locked box within our knowledge, oddly tormenting. We thought of begging my father to intercede, or Johnny Lord, but could not bear the possibility that either of them should fail with Jenner. We must act by ourselves. Barnabas *must* be succoured, but how?

Day after day, spiteful in our helplessness, we met among the roots of the beech tree, scrapingly enlarging our own special caves, outlining crazy schemes. Hope died and flared again. We even thought of taking Jenner prisoner, matching cruelty with cruelty. But all our scheming was wasted, for the final action of Cousin Mary one morning was quite simple and unpremeditated. Courageous in her anger she crept through the hedge to the float, snatched the whip-stick and came running breathlessly back. Solved! Barnabas was succoured! Gleefully we broke the stick into tiny pieces, hiding them in our pockets, waiting for Jenner's return, expecting I know not what. A great pride and exultation was in us all. The sunshine was brighter, more splendid and the birds were singing with us in absolute harmony.

Acutely we heard Jenner clumping back along the path. In our triumph he seemed less big and forbidding, more shabby and stumbling, a demon dethroned. The cream cans winked together in the sunlight as with a foreknowledge of what was to come. Sluggishly he lifted the cans into the float, stepping up beside them, reaching for whip and rein. His hand groped along the tarnished rail. He stared and swore to find the whip-stick gone, looking inside and outside the float for it, glaring up and down the lane, finally blaming the innocent mule. From his pocket he pulled an ugly

## SUCCOUR FOR BARNABAS

knife and chopped from the hedge a stick fully five times as thick as the old rod, trimming it viciously. Stamping aboard he beat mightily with the new rod, cursing passionately. Shocked and stung, poor Barnabas reared a bit and corkscrewed into a gallop.

We stared foolishly, tearfully at each other, emptying the bits of stick from our pockets, disconsolate, disillusioned. There was no justice or rightness any more. By our interference we had simply added to Barnabas's already intolerable burden. Where was God that He permitted such a reversal of good intention? For us all the world was out of balance and the surface sweetness of summer a hideous mockery. Afflicted we wandered, scarred and weakened, savouring food but mildly, shaking apples to the ground in sheer, ridiculous malice, striving to punish God for His blindness.

Even when, later in the day, we heard my father talking very quietly to my mother we were not reconciled; justice had come too late. For it seemed that the frenzied mule had overturned the float in the bend of the lane and that Jenner had been thrown and his neck broken.

## CHRISTMAS FROLIC

THE boy was alarmed. His thin, white face was spongy with unshed tears. Constantly he examined the tiny Christmas tree in his hand, fondling its withered fronds as if they were the ears of a beloved dog. It must be planted soon, else it would be dead and Christmas would die with it. The awful thought made him shiver and chew his thumb.

Anxiously now he moved about the gloomy basement rooms in search of pot and soil. But food for the plant was not there. In despair he poured milk, dipping the tired, thready roots into the crock; but they would not drink, even though he warmed and sweetened the milk. Fiercely he induced the household cat to lick the roots, having great faith in cat-lick: but the plant was not restored.

Feverishly he peered through the basement grilles, burning his hands on their coldness, but the ancient window boxes held only a queer, bleached sediment like the flue gathered from the floors after the beds were made; miserable stuff without nourishment for the weak little stem. Against all instructions, he opened the heavy side door, climbing the nine old-currant steps, staring mournfully across the quiet, flagged Court, wrapping the poor starved roots in a fold of his threadbare jersey for warmth. For it was cold, God Almighty cold, so that even the postman wore half-gloves, and the bells of St. Asaph's sounded like clashing swords instead of like ripe, bouncing oranges.

He had found the Christmas tree with other treasures — a chocolate pipe, a watch that played a bit of a tune when wound, and a splendid bicycle lamp (though he had no bicycle) — by his bedside when he awoke on

## CHRISTMAS FROLIC

that blessed morning. There had been two candles, pink and white, tied to its tip, but it was much too frail to carry even the threat of fire. Already its ears were turning grey as if something were greedily sucking the green from them. He had wanted to ask his mother where he could find new life for it, but she had been much too busy to answer questions. All the musty law offices and chambers in Caprice Court were in her care, and all must be swept and scrubbed and dusted ready to be made dirty again. She wouldn't be back until the last cavernous grate was cross-stitched with absurdly neat firewood, and by then she'd be painfully limp and as much in need of nourishment as the Christmas tree itself. Meanwhile he was supposed to sit quietly in the cracked and creepy basement, amusing himself with the gifts brought overnight — as his mother foolishly said — by a rollicking old Father who drove reindeers where you'd be puzzled to drive a white mouse.

But he couldn't sit still while the tree was so obviously dying. He had looked at it in the smoky flare of the bicycle lamp, and played the watch to it, but it hadn't done it a mite of good. Standing now upon the steps, heedless of the biting cold, he waited patiently for the approach of a slow, old chief clerk grumpily come to collect letters, hoping for supreme wisdom. As the old man, stiff and hooky and touchy as a flint-lock gun, drew level he showed him the tree, begging guidance in the saving of it. But the old clerk had recorded the death of too many good men to be bothered by the death of a mere infant tree, and he huffed on without a word of advice, muttering and wringing his sharp red nose, unable to imagine the tree grown to great and splendid size, head in the wind and roots deep in rich black soil.



## CHRISTMAS FROLIC

Unhappily the boy watched him go. In return for wisdom he had meant to offer his lamp for use when the next fog rose from Westminster Marsh, but now the old man could go his way in darkness, without ever hearing the tune played by the musical watch. Stamping impatiently, the boy struggled to remember where was some good, nourishing dirt. He would pay for it if necessary with the tenpence remaining from a birthday shilling. His mind wandered beyond the barren Court in bleak exploration, and suddenly hope came caracoling. Two streets away, quite close to the shabby school in which so much bright time was wasted, was a tall house standing in a garden like a last bit of bread on an old cracked plate. In the garden was grass, a laburnum tree, and even sunflowers in their season. With a bit of luck he'd be able to snatch some of the ground from under the laburnum tree—the tree surely wouldn't mind being a few flowers short next year, especially when it understood the need of the Christmas tree. With proper food and treatment the Christmas tree would quickly grow into a perfect giant, well able to suck the pink clouds of evening and with branches strong enough to support whole boxes of candles! Such magnificence would be worth whole years of disgrace.

Moving decisively, thin legs racing, the boy crossed the Court, emerging into a street noisy with holiday traffic. Tramcars swayed past with sparking wheels, crammed with merry-makers. Shops wore a gutted look. A jolly hawker was selling holly wreaths without difficulty, and had just collected a handful of fallen berries for the son of a customer to use in a new pea-shooter. In the distance, outside the iniquitous Joan Alive, a Salvation Army choir was deciding upon a hymn, but the boy, although interested, did not linger.

## CHRISTMAS FROLIC

Straight across the road he ran into a street more solemn, yet still subtly alive and glowing with the stuff of Christmas. Orange peel lay in the gutters like chips sheared from a frosty sun. Bright paper chains were looped across fanlights and chandeliers. Unaccustomed chimneys smoked, one of them bursting suddenly into interesting flame, as if it too wished to celebrate the day. Pianos chorused against each other. A melancholy boy was delivering a late, pallid turkey to a flustered cook with floury hands and nose. Further on a little girl held a new doll big as herself against a window that it might see two cats snarling together over a stolen pig's trotter. As he burnished a brass door-knocker, a grey thread of a man in a green baize apron hummed an indecorous song, changing the tune abruptly when a window bumped open and his wife inquired if he would be finished by the new year.

Unobservant in his haste, the boy rounded a corner, pleased to see the laburnum tree standing like the skeleton of a faithful sentry. A shiny, black carriage waited at the gates of the tall house, but beyond wishing that he might borrow the plumes and black velvet of the two horses for a noble game, the boy took little notice of it. One of the hair-like roots of the Christmas tree had broken off in his hand, and it was as if his brain had splintered. Whipping himself with his hand, he panted up to the flaking iron gates, peering anxiously between. Yes, there was the dirt, rather gravelly on top, but sheer enough underneath. A movement of one of the horses caused him to start guiltily, but he recovered and after a hasty glance around crept into the garden. Fortunately all the blinds of the house were drawn, so there was not much danger that he would be seen.

Happily he dug beneath the frozen surface with his

## CHRISTMAS FROLIC

hands and heels, coughing a little in his excitement, sifting the soil carefully, rejecting stones, humming softly between coughs, suddenly silent, for he had neither box nor pot to carry the soil, and his pockets were much too small. He buzzed and spat in annoyance, comforting the Christmas tree with his hands as he gazed high and low. Upon a lower sill of the house was an abandoned-looking top-hat. Just the thing, lord love us! It did not occur to the boy that it had been laid there while its owner busied himself in the house. He listened and spat again to ease his aching throat, remembering that he ought not to have come so far without scarf or coat. But then the matter was important. Not a sound from the house. Stepping cautiously, he snatched the hat, charmed by its shape, filling it with the sifted mould, planting the tree firmly, talking to it as if convalescence were assured. A final pat and he stood upright, brushing his knees, stamping to revive warmth in his thin, chilled body, lifting the hat, preparing to return, very happy to think that he had saved a whole tree from death.

Deafened by a boiling in his ears, he did not at once hear the hoarse swing of a door or notice a griffin-headed man in dingy black emerge from the house and reach towards the sill. Astonished to find the sill empty, the undertaker reared and gaped, hand clapped to his bald head. Then he turned, saw boy and hat, and moved with clumsy swiftness. Too late, the boy began to run. As he reached the gate a strange-smelling fist caught his shoulder, and an angry voice demanded explanation.

‘What the hell do you think you’re up to, stealing things this way?’

Coughing and stammering weakly in his fear the boy faced the undertaker: ‘The tree was ill. . . .’

## CHRISTMAS FROLIC

'Ill!' The undertaker laughed jeeringly: 'That's good, that is. Using my hat for a hospital. What's your name? Where do you live? Come on, now, no lies. We'll have to see into this. Do you know what that hat cost? Five-and-twenty shillings, that's what. You don't think *I'm* going to be the loser, do you?'

The boy shook his head, cuffing away bloody spittle, seeing ruination for the widow and himself, panting out address and circumstances with a disjointed plea for mercy: 'I'm sorry. I didn't think. With a bit of brushing the hat'll be all right. I've got tenpence. . . .'

'Sorry you should be and sorrier yet!' The undertaker wrote precisely in a little black book, snapping the elastic loudly. Unpityingly he watched the boy stoop in a spasm of coughing, noting his wasted condition with professional acuteness, his tone softening suddenly, unexpectedly: 'Listen, boy. What would you say if I let you keep the hat and said nothing about it?'

Stunned by the possibility of such generosity, the boy could only stutter confusedly. Mockingly the undertaker watched him, opening the gate for him to pass through.

'That's all right, boy. Don't bother to thank me. You can keep it, and all you've got to do in return is to give your Ma my card. No catch in it. I'm not going to have the law on you, not me! Young meself once.' The undertaker smiled strangely, producing a card: 'Just say, "With Mister Blenkiron's compliments", and that his charges are very moderate. That's all.' He winked knowingly, thrusting the boy on his way: 'No hurry, only don't forget. So long now. I'll be seeing you again. . . .'

## BATTLE OF SMITH

THERE were only three of us in the dim, smoky bar-room of the Railway Hotel at Dancombe that night, old Charley Paul, the landlord, a slick, bleachy-faced stranger and myself. Charley, bald, deceptively sleepy-eyed, big-cheeked and deep-voiced, always reminds me of a weary mastiff. He winked at me as I entered, asked if it was snowing yet, pulled a pint and went to kick the logs on the hearth together, standing warming his huge behind. The stranger took another drink, asked what time the last train came through and began again where he'd evidently left off.

'I'm telling you it's a book you can't afford to do without and I'm sure this gent will agree. Here, take a look at it.'

And he shoved a large book across at me and attacked Charley again:

'I'm telling you it would more than double your trade if you knew just exactly how the minds of your customers worked. You could *create* custom, make this place busy as a sixpenny store just by exerting your personality. And all for fifteen bob. Just think of it.'

I looked at the book. It was called *Psychology and Success*. I looked at the salesman and I liked neither. According to the book success in business and love was only a matter of psychology. I wondered whether the salesman had read it. He was assuring Charley that he had already sold thousands, which was possible when one considered the illustrations in the love section. But Charley wasn't impressed. He emptied some fluff from a waistcoat pocket, commenting in his quiet, innocent way:

## BATTLE OF SMITH

'Funny word, ain't it? I wouldn't have the brain to understand half what's in a book like that.'

'Nonsense, my dear chap. An intelligent man like you!'

'Ah well, I don't rightly know. We'm pretty simple folk round here, y'know, slow and short y'might say. Old-fashioned, that's the way of it. M'yes, now I come to think of it there was a chap here once who worked somewhat on those lines, used to say he could judge anything or anybody and make it pay. Name of Yaley Smith; had a place over at Double Crutch. Crabby little miser of a man with a face like a frost-bitten cabbage. They called him Yaley because he was tighter than a first-class lock. Ain't boring you, am I?'

The salesman said no. Evidently psychology demanded that when a customer chose to talk, let him.

'Make a profit out of nose-drip, this Yaley would, if he had the chance. Never drank anything but watered cider and used to cut his own hair to save tuppence. Clever in a way. Called himself a farmer, but most of the time he was slatting around in a little old spring-cart, dealing and scraping, always buying and selling something, always at a profit too. Profit was his religion, though what he hoped to do with his pile was beyond me. He was a bachelor, y'see, with no friends or kin that anyone knew of.

'Well, he'd a big old motor-car standing under a lean-to on this farm of his, a good car too, been there quite a time. Cost him a couple of quid when they sold up the Bencross place. They used it as a shooting brake, rigged it up with a fine, coachbuilt ash body, made it nice and sensible. No good to Yaley though, except to keep chickens in, but he reckoned he'd be able to make a profit on it one day, swap it tidy like.

## BATTLE OF SMITH

'One day he came home to find a couple of gipsy lads waiting for him, another pair of Smiths as it happened, Bambo and Sixty. Nice chaps. Known 'em for years. They asked me about Yaley's car and I told 'em all I knew, dealing straight as they always have with me. I didn't think they'd be able to make a deal though, knowing Yaley.

'Bambo's quiet and Sixty talks for both of 'em. He explained to Yaley how they'd been thinking of mechanization, looking for a motor to get 'em around a bit quicker than the old cob and cart. If the car worked all right, after a bit of a do-up, which would be Bambo's job, they'd like to buy it, if the price was near enough right.

'Yaley listened, you can bet, very keen and willing, thinking like clockwork, looking the cob and cart over, pricing things all round. He said the car was all there and perfect, but that money wasn't what it was. He'd be sporting enough though to swap the car for the cob and cart. Made out he was doing 'em a rare favour too, arguing that they'd have no use for either if they took over the motor.

'I reckon Sixty had thought of that too. It was a toughish deal, but he agreed to it. And that's the way they fixed it, with leave to camp alongside till they got the car going. They emptied their gear out and Yaley locked the cob and cart away, taking no chances, as usual.

'Bambo's the mechanical one, though he don't make much show of what he knows. He didn't even grouse about missing bits and pieces but walked into town and got spares. Then he got really busy, taking the engine to bits and damned near everything else, cleaning out the chicken muck, making the whole job bright and sweet. It took him nearly a week though and when

## BATTLE OF SMITH

he'd finished the engine wouldn't even begin to go. Sixty grumbled plenty about it to old Yaley, but Yaley said that was their pigeon and a deal was a deal.

'Bambo had another go, trying all he knew. But still the engine wouldn't go. Sixty reckoned they'd had enough, that Yaley had sold 'em a pup. He said so, too, hot and strong. He said they wanted their cob and cart back, that they'd wasted time enough. But Yaley had 'em beat. He'd sold the cob and cart and he said if they didn't get their damned car out of the way soon he'd charge 'em rent. That's as far as his what-d'yecall-it psychology went, y'see.

'Sixty didn't say any more just then, but he and Bambo did some thinking. They got old Yaley weighed up too, after a bit, catching him where he'd never been caught before. Bambo went on working and Sixty seemed to have given up hope, just lazing around, poaching half the night to earn their keep.

'Well, one day the engine did pop and hum for a minute or two, then packed up again. Yaley hopped across, wondering, I reckon, if he hadn't been done after all. But Bambo shook his head and Sixty talked pretty quiet and sad.

"A pity you ever swapped such a no-good car."

"And for why?"

"I reckon you'll find out all right. Something'll have to die before that engine lives again. It's been dead too long."

"What the hell d'you mean?"

'Sixty must've looked at him right pityingly: "Didn't you know you can't make even metal work again without putting a bit of real life into it? With a going sort of car it's enough just to use it, it takes up a bit of *your* life. But with a car that's been dead as long as that one it'll need *all* the life out of something else to get it going."



## BATTLE OF SMITH

“Never heard such nonsense in all me life!”

“Ah well, mister, you brought it on yourself. You’ll see.”

Yaley did see too, for the engine popped once more, ran for a minute and stopped again.

“Nearly did it,” Sixty said: “But it needs more than chicken puff to do it.”

And off he rambled, leaving Yaley a bit hot and bothered, especially after he found a couple of hens dead behind the barn for no reason that he could think of.

The next day four more fowls died, the day after that a pig. But still the engine wouldn’t run properly. Yaley began to think pretty hard. He began to spend time galore watching Bambo on the job, trying to understand, half thinking of getting a mechanic out from town. Then he had another think about the cost and what would happen if the mechanic said the engine really was finished.

He began to get a bit nervy and worried too, fumbling his dealing, making no profit at all. He even began to believe in the idea that metal couldn’t run again without a dose of life. Then another pig died, can’t tell you why, though p’r’aps you can guess. The engine ran for five minutes that time. Sixty said if it would only run for half an hour the metal would get its pluck back and live again. He said too that it might even cost the life of a cow.

“There’s plenty we don’t understand. It might even finish one of us, grab the spitting life clean out of us. Wish we’d never taken it on, but Bambo’s made up his mind to get it going.”

That finished Yaley. He was out of his depth and badly frightened by then. He told ’em they’d have to get out and take the car with ’em, even if they had to

## BATTLE OF SMITH

push it. Sixty had him where he wanted him: "Ten quid and we'll go, car and all." Yaley tried to argue but Sixty stuck fast and Yaley paid up. Must've hurt him bad, that part of it. He even lent a horse to pull the car to the road. He just wanted to see the last of it. He did too.

'Bambo had another go at tinkering out on the road and said he thought the thing was working up to go. He swung the handle and the engine started. It kept on going too, full and strong. Yaley must've seen then how he'd been done. It finished him. He simply had a heart-attack there and then and died. Funny go. That's about all there is to it. Same line of thinking as that book I reckon.'

The salesman clucked in false appreciation: 'Just so. An excellent story. A regular battle of wits! Now about the book. I don't want to press you. You just sign here and I'll leave it with you to consider. Can't say fairer than that.'

But Charley must have been caught that way before.

'Reckon it'll be enough if I look at it to-night and you take it with you in the morning.'

'In the morning!'

'Yes, mister, the last train went ten minutes ago. Didn't you hear it? Dear, dear. But you'll be all right. We do a good bed and breakfast for seven-and-six. Sign here, if y'please. Now ain't that funny that your name should be Smith too?'

## APPLE WOMEN

DAY after day, all through the long, hot summer, the two old women sat together at one end of the green-painted shelter facing the sea, sharing the small luxuries, a few sweets maybe, an orange or a soft bit of cake, which one or the other brought, and enjoying the laughing briskness of the holiday crowds, forgetful of their own sorry age and ailments. They were very poor and shabby in their dress, very old and forgotten by their kin, living like mice in tiny back-street rooms which the sun never entered.

Meeting by a miracle of chance — the dead husband of one had once served the other with bread in a London suburb — the shelter between the piers had become a chapel to them, a kindly, holy place from which life, out of which they had so nearly slipped, was viewed with a sympathy and mellowness which had been impossible in their old state of loneliness. Sitting there together, bonneted heads nodding harmoniously, they seemed to absorb a measure of the merry, vigorous life passing before them, reviving so that words and laughter came easily and their minds held light and shade and the beginnings of poetry once more.

Sometimes the seat was occupied when they came, and for a time they were forced to sit apart, mildly indignant that any should rob them of their one pleasure. But, the moment the seat was empty, up they pottered, hampered by their heavy skirts but strong in their eagerness, umbrellas tapping loudly so that it seemed as if Time itself was anxious too and was holding its breath. A sighing and creaking and down they sank gratefully.

## APPLE WOMEN

'My! I thought they would never go.'

And they would nod contentedly, utterly at peace, and one would polish clumsy, ancient spectacles while the other loosed the laces of her crumpled boots. Comfortable at last they'd produce their little treasures of food from their jet-beaded bags, laugh over them like children and hide them gleefully away to be shared later. Softly then they talked, exchanging memories, pitying the crippled riders in bath-chairs, laughing when a laughing group passed, anxious when a child fell or one of the beach ponies pranced alarmingly.

So they spent day after happy day, enthroned on that hard wooden seat, never noticing its hardness. Often they blessed the great luck that had brought them together and wondered why they had been chosen for such happiness. As the season advanced they came earlier to the shelter to be sure of a place. Greatly they admired the patterned flowers in the sunken gardens, their old eyes blinking gratefully towards the massed colours many times through the day. Sometimes they were fortunate enough to possess a fine flower of their own, as on the day when a child flicked the heads from two fine sunflowers in passing.

'It seemed such a pity to let them lie there, so I just took them.'

They smiled understandingly at each other, the sunflowers in their laps, their ungloved hands folded quietly about them. In the beginning they had worn gloves throughout the day, but lately there had seemed a wrongness in the wearing, and they had come to love the touch of breezes on their dry, wrinkled skins. One day — why not? — they were going to paddle down on the sandy spit where the children flew their brilliant-coloured kites, but they were hardly young or daring

## APPLE WOMEN

enough yet. A little more peace and companionship and they would be ready for anything.

Then there was the never-to-be-forgotten day when a large, handsome apple rolled from a trotting hawker's cart and was brought to the shelter to be polished and admired. Their toothless mouths watered at its rosiness and they decided recklessly to eat it, chumble it as well as they could, when the afternoon steamer returned to the pierhead.

Like meek mothers of the Fates they sat in smiling anticipation. Others came to the shelter and went again; a mother with her child, which made them think of their own children now dead and gone; two nuns, hard-faced, like two burnt bones, exchanging addresses from their black begging books, which made them shake their heads and wonder why some should choose to spend their lives balanced on a knife-edge; a very fat man and his very thin wife, which made them smile exceedingly, indecorously perhaps, although they did not need to breathe the reason why, and, lastly, there came a young girl, very shy and beautiful in her fresh white dress.

The presence of the girl pleased the old women deeply. Looking at her they were refreshed, inspired even. They would have liked to talk to her, to have glimpsed the lovely hopes in her mind. But they were shy too, aware of their own ugliness, and knew that she would not relish their prying. They would have felt the same at her age. So they whispered to each other and wondered why she sat alone when she should have been the pride and bride of a fine young man.

Musing so, one of them sucked and bubbled suddenly, nodding towards the bright green railings of the promenade. There leaned the very young man for so nice a girl. Tall and serious-faced, he was looking

## APPLE WOMEN

admiringly, longingly at her, and he reddened under his tan when he saw that the old women had noticed. But still he could not help looking at the girl.

'A nice boy,' the old women murmured, and wondered how to work a kindly miracle. One of them, pondering, quivered suddenly and whispered excitedly to the other, and, presently, the way being clear, the apple rolled from her lap, rolled sweetly to the very feet of the young man. Neatly but frowningly he picked it up, stepping across. 'I believe. . .'

But the old women shook their heads solemnly, nodding towards the girl. 'It must be hers.'

The young man hesitated, breathed deeply and approached the dreaming girl.

'If you will allow me. . .'

The girl stared, blushed, and shook her head.

'But it must belong to you . . . there's no one else.'

The young man placed the apple in her lap. She stared down at it, then back at him as he waited. The old women were peeping, smiling. She stood up confusedly, the apple in her hand. The young man thought that he had never seen such loveliness and grace before. His heart began to sink, then rose again.

'Thank you, thank you very much,' she was saying.

The sun seemed brighter and the sea and sky more brilliant as she said it.

'But if you would like it,' she whispered.

'Only half,' the young man said.

She gave him the apple. He felt for a knife, nodding boldly towards the beach.

'Much nicer down there. . .'

Slowly they went away. The old women smiled delightedly.

## APPLE WOMEN

'Such a very nice day,' one of them said, and for the rest of the day they sat like queens, forgetful of age and poverty, proud to feel that they were still of some use, that they were still part of the power and glory.

## THE STUFFED COW

SWEENEY's Hotel at Dunmacoy was a frost-bitten barracks of a place, only made endurable by the quiet, sporting presence of Sweeney himself and the cheerful, housekeeping Nora. The rooms were long and over-tall, the ancient furniture like crabs in aquarium tanks. The fireplaces were no more than cat roosts, the draughts strong enough to slice bacon, as Sweeney himself said in his brief, cynical way. Even so it was better than most and good enough for patient commercials and stray Englishmen like myself who came merely for a spin at the salmon and not for sluggish comfort.

Not that the place was utterly uncomfortable and inhospitable; it couldn't be with Nora in charge, for she'd the true Irish gift of making a welcome. She was thirtyish, thinly handsome and amazingly efficient, mothering us all unobtrusively. Food and drink were served at any time convenient to yourself, and no objections anywhere if you felt like a week in bed, and always she'd ask your help in making out the bill, often charging nothing at all if you'd kept the house going in salmon, arguing that the bacon and eggs, the hearth-baked bread and the butter and the bed were not worth the mentioning.

Anyway, the hotel itself was the least of Sweeney's interests, business being mainly concentrated in the combined bar-room and general store at one end of the house, this, with the smoke-blackened kitchen behind, being by far the warmest and most pleasant corner, siege-packed as it was with groceries, tobacco, hardware and anything else you fancied at one end and well bottled at the other. There were bacon boxes and beer



## THE STUFFED COW

crates for seats and a magnificent cheesy smell that was almost a meal in itself. There was also a sensible fireplace into which went anything burnable, even an odd chunk of fat bacon whenever Sweeney fancied a blaze.

This and the kitchen fire were the only two that were kept going all through the winter, stoked recklessly from the cottage-sized turf stack in the yard, Sweeney himself often sleeping in the kitchen, on the mat, so to speak, rather than climb the stairs to the icy bedroom. He was, remarkably, a bachelor, and so could please himself.

He was a queer, likeable fellow, thin-faced and rumple-haired, strong in a jack-knify way, a master hand at poker, but no reader, although he had a bargainable knowledge of most things from acorns to zebras, shrewd and sure and dignified in his dealing, and capable of a bewildering generosity when he chose. He rolled his own cigarettes expertly and drank whisky as if he hated it, ordering his clothes from Dublin in a wholesale way, rarely wearing the right jacket with the right trousers, but whether from choice or accident I never knew.

He knew the county through and through, and would buy and sell anything, although never too busy to take a day off after the salmon or a trip to the races, where his knowledge was always profitable. It took a long time to know the way of him, but even then there was plenty one didn't know, not because he was deliberately secretive, but merely because he'd never had the habit of talking about himself. I could not understand why he'd never married, for instance, but the answer came one day, indirectly as usual, and so it was with most things.

I think he enjoyed those first days in February,

## THE STUFFED COW

spinning for salmon, although he never said so. The last time he met me at the station in a sumptuous Ford; he bought and sold cars as easily as eggs and was just as likely to be driving around in a five-ton lorry as in a crested limousine. A brief nod, a half-smile, and he was looking the rods over almost as if I were a salesman, remotely pleased when I told him there was a new one for him, as promised, but merely remarking that he'd got a yard or two of cottage-woven tweed for me, just to show that he hadn't forgotten me entirely.

We talked over the prospects of fish, the weather, how's business, and what a mess the world was in. Back at the hotel we had a drink, Sweeney leaning easily, talking off-handedly about an Adam fireplace in a broken-down mansion over the hill, missing nothing of O'Reilly's dealings with customers at the grocery end, nodding to some, doing a deal in pigs in half a dozen words, so quiet and casual that I wondered whether I was a nuisance and he was just being polite.

But the next morning he was up well before day-break, rousting the fire in the kitchen, brisk and surprisingly talkative. We looked over the tackle together, and he handled the new rod appreciatively. A glance outside and he promised a day crisp and clear as the best Waterford, and then was helping Nora to lay breakfast. Fresh and smiling, pleased to see Sweeney so nearly gay, Nora asked what would we be liking for breakfast. Sweeney grinned:

'How about twelve boiled eggs and a bottle of stout?'

Nora laughed in her frank, unembarrassed way: 'Sure, and if ye mean it. . . .'

'Begod and 'twould sink us entirely! Better make it fried and bacon, and did ye get the lamb kidneys for the man?'

## THE STUFFED COW

'I did, although it's the queer taste he has to be liking such gobbets.'

And Nora turned to her kettles and pans, while I asked Sweeney just what the joke was.

'Oh, 'twas just the order we always had from old Mike Fierney. Ye'd not be knowing him, I think. A great lad for a deal or an argument. He has the farm beyond the bog. A fine hand with cattle. He'd be driving a bunch through to market and stop here for a bite of breakfast. Twelve boiled eggs and a bottle of stout, every time, well done, and he'd knock the tops off the lot neat as a clock striking before scooping 'em clean.'

Sweeney laughed to think of it, nodding upwards to the stuffed and patched-looking head of a fine bull hanging high: 'That was the sort of stuff Mike bred, grand fierce beasts. How come that one there? Ah well, if ye must know, it had to do with young Jimmy Linkman. He was English, like yourself, and used to come for the shooting out on the bog. A nice tidy boyo, keen as a two-year-old at grass, and always thinking up new tricks to be bettering his bag. That year he was trying out a real powerful idea.

'It's cover is the problem out there on the bog, as ye know, and Jimmy thought he'd got the answer. He tried turf stacks and sunken barrels and didn't like 'em, so he'd built a stuffed cow to be planting out there, just a whole hide stretched on a framework to look like a sitting cow, with room enough for himself inside. It looked real enough to milk until ye saw the flaps he'd made to be shooting through.

'It worked like Collins too. The birds weren't bothering about a tired old cow, and Jimmy brought 'em down in car loads. But there was trouble ahead of a sort he didn't expect, for one morning someone

## THE STUFFED COW

dropped the rail of Mike's small paddock and loosed his best bull. The bull was surprised to be loose but soon got to looking around for a bit of pleasure, and when it saw Jimmy's stuffed cow it came helling across like an old woman to gossip.

'Jimmy didn't like it. He could see that bull dancing all over him and getting mad when he found the goods weren't as advertised. There wasn't time to get out and run, so he just sat tight and, when the bull came to sniffing distance, blasted away. I don't think the bull even had time to be annoyed, for Jimmy was a good shot and desperate too; it just dropped and died in its joyful prime, ye might say, and Jimmy hacked off its tail and came stamping back, mad enough to be shooting Mike too for such a gingery trick, but wanting my opinion first.

'I couldn't understand it at all, for Mike wasn't playful that way. We had a drink, and Jimmy got talking swift and hard. Sure and hadn't he seen someone drop the rail and who could it have been but Mike? And then Mike himself turned up with the head of the bull under his arm and blood in his eye. We had to be holding them apart, with Jimmy calling Mike a murdering rascal to be letting the bull free, and Mike calling him the same to be shooting a poor rambling creature, and him denying he'd dropped the rail.

'Now Mike's an honest one, and when he says he didn't, well, he just didn't.'

'“Well, who the hell did?”'

'“I did, to be sure!” but it wasn't either Mike or Jimmy that said it, but Mike's daughter Mary. She was standing in the doorway, all hot and choice.

'“But why, forever?”'

'“Just for fun, but he'd no right to be shooting the poor thing!”'

## THE STUFFED COW

'There was plenty more fun right there, I'm telling ye, with Mike and Jimmy going for Mary and she going back. Jimmy had a terrible sarcastic tongue but Mary had something better. She picked up a cabbage and slung it at him, and then she found some eggs and we all suffered. Jimmy tried to hold her but she broke away, and the last we saw of them they were away down the street like a dog and hen.'

'But whatever made her turn the bull loose at all?'

Sweeney tried the edge of a knife thoughtfully, and sugared his tea, which was odd, for he rarely used sugar: 'I guess that was just her way of calling attention to herself. Anyway they were married a month later and gone from here for good.' Slowly he stirred and tasted: 'Begod, Nora, there's no heart to the tea at all!' And away he went into the bar for a bottle to be improving it.

Nora stood sadly still, white and heedless of a smoking pan. Foolishly mistaking the cause of her dismay I tried to cheer her.

'Ach, it isn't the tea at all that's wrong,' she said slowly: 'It's just that Mary Fierney was the one he wanted himself, and him with no eye at all for anyone else since the day she went.'

## A SIMPLE TALE

I CAME upon the cottage quite unexpectedly, as one might a picture in a book. It was set in the curve of the Bay like an uncut and solitary gem in a crescent brooch. Approach was possible either by way of the beach, or along a blackberry-beaded path which had split on reaching the crumbling garden walls to branch on either side and unite again, as would two bent bows laid string by string, a divergence suggesting that perhaps half of the few wayfarers had lacked either courage or desire to pass the cockle-roofed porch. Three tall chimneys projected from the roof like the legs of an upturned stool, a viny wisp of smoke wavering above one of them and bird-sown oats sprouting from another, the tall stems nodding as if marking the rhythm of a divine waltz. The slates seemed to have ripened in sympathy with the few apples yet clinging to the two trees crouched together at the rear. A great iron X supported the blind and flaking side wall; rusty tears had dripped from its two lowermost points with such persistency as to make it seem as though the X was fitted with stilts and simply propped against the wall. A single poppy and a clump of mallow, St. John's wort and flowering currant shrubs sheltered as best they could behind the breached walls, the poppy leading a futile prayer against the wind that never ceased to rake them with scalding sand.

It could not be said that the cottage faced the sea; rather did it look sideways at it, a little patronizingly, it seemed, perhaps because it was aware that it was beyond the reach of the highest tide. An upturned boat lay in the bleached grass fringing the beach, its seams gaping hungrily, despite the efforts of countless

## A SIMPLE TALE

spiders to stitch them together; a name was visible on the gunwale in letters so worn as to seem no more than the idle scribblings of a snail — '*Michael Swan — Port Anne*', a reposeful combination. Nets were draped between four bearded piles, forming an amphitheatre in which two butterflies pirouetted before an inattentive audience of flies. A remarkable calceolaria bloomed before the one window that could be said to view the sea with all attention, a mass of yellow bubbles rising waist high, suggesting that a huge and wonderful crab had chosen to sun itself by the white-washed wall. An oar had been clamped to a corbel so that the blade jutted in the manner of an accusing finger, and upon it was burnt the single, almost threatening word 'Tea'.

I opened the wicket, and the gatekeeper, an almond white cat curled in a mouldering lobster pot, awoke and stared intently, as through a barely open door, sinking again into sleep before I had crossed the cobbled yard. The kitchen was full of clotted sunlight and smelt faintly of eucalyptus and new bread. Blue flames licked each other's wounds in the grate. A scorched blanket was spread over the table, and a thin little woman with high rolled sleeves was working backwards and forwards, goffering a petticoat. So energetically had she been handling the iron that her blouse had escaped from her waistband, and was rippling petal-wise above the black lily of her skirt. Her thin hair was drawn tightly back, the coiled knot resting in the nape, a parting running over like a path across a grey moorland. Her lips were puckered as if the taste of a bitter medicine yet lingered in her mouth. She started as I knocked with the luck-stone hanging from the lintel, turning, her blue-grey eyes hard with astonishment. I offered explanation.

## A SIMPLE TALE

'Milk?' she echoed soberly. Replacing her iron upon an upturned basin, she hurried across to the dresser and lifted the saucer capping a great jug, stroking her lips thoughtfully. 'Yes, I've enough and to spare. An egg and some vinegar? Why yes, I can manage that too . . . If you'll just be stepping this way and taking a seat . . .' She unlatched a door and led the way into a brooding parlour. 'You must be excusing the litter — the house is so small, we've hardly room for our souls.' She seemed to settle her soul more firmly, as one might dispose a child in a cradle. With nervous haste, she swept a folded suit and a foot-square Bible from a horsehair armchair, dusted the seat with her apron, and rearranged the antimacassar. 'I'll not be keeping you many minutes,' she said, and went from the room, her skirts caressing divers chair legs, causing them to smile faintly through the film of dust.

It was impossible not to feel chilled in that room. Gazing at the rock-crystal crucifix propped upon the mantel, it was not difficult to imagine that I sat in a relic-strewn chapel. A quaint little harmonium drowsed in one corner; had I squeezed a hymn from it, the nameless Methodist parson guarding the doorway, Lord Nelson, the Prodigal Son, Florence Nightingale, and the host of hour-glass and barrel-shaped nonentities staring from their wormy frames, would have opened their mouths and sung lustily. Their concentrated gaze was vaguely terrifying. I counted thirty-three pairs of eyes and the single one of Lord Nelson centred upon me, and was almost moved to declare my innocence. The arms of the horsehair chair were like prickly leaves to the touch, a fortunate peculiarity, since by maintaining a firm grip I was able to view the remaining furnishings without awe. The vast number of shells disposed about the room led



## A SIMPLE TALE

me to suppose that a feast of shellfish had taken place there at an early date, the debris being only partially removed. There were souvenirs enough to stock a bazaar. A parched fern drooped helplessly over a bottle of Jordan water; dust had mellowed the tints of a pyramid of wax fruits; vases and candlesticks stood like beggars at street corners. Volcanic eruptions seemed to have taken place inside the couch and chair seats. The wallpaper was faded into the likeness of columns of Ethiopic script, corners everywhere hanging down as if marking the place of a student. Something moved in the chimney from time to time — memories perhaps — causing little showers of soot to rain upon the paper flowers filling the fireplace. Curtains hung like crucified saints. One object only held the attention by its beauty. Upon the window-ledge was a model of a fifteenth-century galleon, a perfect piece built of some smoky wood, with sails bellying as if under wind pressure. A tall, knife-bladed cactus flanked the model; the calceolaria beneath the window rose like a sandstone bluff; beyond, was the sea, a great blue-green paten with a boat resting like a fallen leaf on the rim — the galleon might have been skirting a tropic coast. . . .

Splashes of sound came from the kitchen before the survey was done — the mellow chiming of glassware commingling with the profound grumbling of a tray and a brittle waterfall of music from a dropped spoon. The little woman entered suddenly, unfolding a table-cloth starched to the stiffness of buckram. With quick, fluttering movements, she cleared the trembling table of ornaments and spread the cloth as carefully as if she were dressing an altar, staring fixedly as I commended on the arrangement of the folds.

‘Indeed they are,’ she murmured thoughtfully. ‘Just

## A SIMPLE TALE

like wings, gulls' wings, as you say — a pair at each corner of the table.' She was silent for a moment, soft eyed, contemplating something deep within her soul. 'My son, he was used to say things like that,' she said, very slowly, and hurried away, returning almost immediately with a laden tray. 'My son, he always used to say that spiders' webs were the ghosts of wheels, of old-time shields and baskets...' Her thin hands trembled as she set jug, glass, egg and cruet within reach.

'A keen comparison that surely is. I should like to meet — to talk with your son. There are few who walk with open eyes....'

Her hands came together and held each other tightly, and I wished the words unsaid.

'My son, he is buried over the hill.' She watched the words diminish and vanish, grown suddenly very old. 'Buried over there he is...' She pointed uncertainly. 'So quiet — no one knows but me.' Words seemed to form against her will. 'You're a stranger, but no matter. Sometimes I feel it is too much for just one to know. Yet who can I share a soreful secret like that with? There's only Michael — my husband Michael — and he must never know — his heart would surely shrivel....'

Her lips moved on, but no words came. Her eyes wavered round the room from face to face, as if she sought permission to shell her secret. Rising suddenly, she moved across to the window-ledge, lifting the galleon with great care, a fleeting, broken smile lighting her face, as a candle lights an empty room. She stood the model before me, and sank into a chair like one exhausted by a great labour.

'My son, he made that — he'd clever hands. His head was full of beautiful growing things. He saw

## A SIMPLE TALE

things with his soul. He'd tell Michael and me of wonders he'd seen in his travels, things that no one but him would notice. It was like reading the Bible to listen to him. It wasn't fair that he should die — he loved too well — God ought to have seen . . . But I mustn't say such things. John, he always used to say that to die was better than being born — he knew.'

She stroked the flowing shape of the galleon, wandering beyond her grief. Her voice became very low; she might have been talking to herself, each word a primrose laid upon a grave:

'It was natural he should want to be a sailor — sea salt was in his blood. When he was a wee spillikin, he used to talk to the waves as though they were his brothers. Call them by name, he would — Kalehead, Eight-Tooth, Lazer . . . He'd sailed all the seas of the world before he was twenty-five. He was second mate — he'd worked his way up so quietly. Each time he came home I could see a difference — he was more grown up, more sure of himself. Looking at him, I'd say, "Nothing can disturb our John", and nothing human could. He'd a way with him — a way of looking at you that scraped away all the muck in your brain. . . .

'He made this beautiful ship on his last voyage. I can see him now, coming home and mounting it on my floury pasteboard. "There, Mum," he said. "Your ship's come home at last", and he laughed like a true son of God, and told us to unload. Tucked away inside, Michael and me found a packet of money — enough to keep us afloat for five years — with some tobacco for father and a fine brooch for me. Rare dreams we had that night. Three weeks he was home, laughing and singing and saying things so beautiful they hurt. And then it was time for him to go. He went one morning, and we went with him as far as Portsdown. He told

## A SIMPLE TALE

us to look out for his ship as she passed down Channel in the early morning, told us how she'd be dressed, how soon he'd be home again. It was all too true. On the day he sailed, a terrible storm broke — the winds were right out of temper, you could hardly hear yourself speak. Father and me, we told ourselves everything would be all right with our boy. We watched for the ship — the *Spinning Cloud* it was named — but not a sign could we see. We thought all was well — Michael still thinks so.

'A handful of days went by. On a Saturday, it was, that I noticed how excited the gulls at Kinsey Point were. All morning they screamed and squabbled, flying high like bits of paper in a wind. I'd my work — I didn't think what they could be at. Just after noon, two young stranger men came and asked for a plank and some sailcloth — they'd found all that was left of a drowned man out at the Point. They took what they wanted. Presently they returned, all mucked with sweat and a little sickened, and laid their find in the outhouse. I hung some flypapers over it, for the flies were ravenous that year. A rag of shirt dragged like a torn wing. When they'd gone, I screwed myself to lift the cloth. I knew that shirt, for I'd washed and stitched it so few days before. Our John had come home again. I picked the limpets from his boots, and thought of father, praying to God to help me keep the secret. He heard me . . . There was nothing to tell that it was our boy, except the shirt, and Michael wouldn't be remembering that — he's not a remembering man.

'I met him when he came home, and told him some poor sailor had been taken by the sea and washed ashore. He looked — I'll never forget how he looked — but he didn't know it was our John. I was fearing the news of the shipwreck would come to him. I wrote to the

## A SIMPLE TALE

agents, asking for a true word, and they told me all was well, naming the ports the *Spinning Cloud* had already called at — I've the letter somewhere — it was nicely put. I knew then that our John had been washed overboard, perhaps when he was trying to sight home. Somehow the news hadn't reached the agents. They and Michael wouldn't know until the ship came home with a new mate. But God was kind, for she never came home again. She was wrecked in a foreign sea, thousands of miles away, everyone being saved, so they said. The crew scattered. Michael thinks John is trying his hand at a job out East, that he's doing well, and won't write until he's made a fortune. Please God he may always think that. . . .'

The ears of the white cat twitched irritably as I passed out of the yard, but it did not wake. It knew all, but affected to know nothing. The Bay was empty. The boat seen earlier on the rim was now drawn up on the beach, very like a dead whale with the harpoon yet projecting. Michael Swan was fettering a skepful of lobsters. I crossed and he nodded distantly. "Dafternoon to you. Ay, 'tis a pretty day." He chipped the words off very deliberately. He was a big man, grey as a badger, and with curiously gentle hands. His eyes were so deep set that looking at them was like looking down twin corridors into velvet hung rooms. A priest would have found it a difficult matter to interest him. A torn angler fish lay in the bottom of the boat. He picked it up, and, noting my interest, made slow comment:

'God do father some queer shapes, to be sure. It was caught in one of the pots — its jaws broken and its fishing rod gone. I killed it as quickly as I could . . .' He seemed to be apologizing to Someone unseen.

## A SIMPLE TALE

I spoke of a similar fish met with in the Caribbean Sea, and he eyed me thoughtfully, piling words, like so many bricks, before speaking. His jersey had been darned in many places with a bright blue wool. His gaze visited the neat patches as systematically as a bee visits flowers in a garden.

'She've been mentioning our boy, haven't she?' He nodded towards the cottage. 'Aye, I could tell by the model being moved from the sill. She's that proud of 't. She've likely been telling how he's making headway out East, maybe asked you to inquire of your friends for news of a John Swan? I'm thanking you, but you needn't be bothering. Our boy's home already, but she — the wife — don't know it. She's only a weak little body, and if she but knew that John was lying over the hill in the Strangers' Corner, she'd not be long for this earth. He was washed overboard on the outward voyage nigh on two years ago. The tides played with him and flung him on the Rocks below the Point. I found him in the early morning and took everything that proved who 'twas — buttons, tabs, everything — and went straightway to Portsdown, meaning to have him carried there. But, while I was gone, two youngsters found him and brought him home. She never knew 'twas her own flesh and blood lying out there. She greeted me sadly enough: "Some poor fellow has been washed up . . . We must do all we can to find out who he is . . . his mother will be wearing her heart away for news. . . ."'

## SALESMANSHIP

GEORGE CORDON was a nice fellow, but unreliable in some ways. He was chief salesman for a firm of bridge builders, although you'd never think it to look at him, for he had the manners and appearance of a successful actor of the drawing-room comedy school, tall and sleek as a well-bred vase, beautifully barbered and tailored, with platinum fittings, so to speak. He was among the three best sellers of bridges in the world, accustomed to correspond by cablegram only, I imagine, since he appeared not to write letters.

It was ten years since I'd seen him. That was in Ireland, where he was planning something connected with the Shannon scheme. I'd equipped and taught him all I knew about fly-fishing to fill in leisure time. Then he had left abruptly for New Zealand where, we both understood, the fishing was superb. He said he'd write and let me know but, of course, he never had written.

Last week I met him again, quite by chance. He was as handsome and as busy as ever; something to do with pontoon bridges this time, all very hush-hush and important. He remembered me well enough, grinned amiably, looked at his watch and said, what about a drink and a bite? he knew a place just round the corner where they had some almost still Perrier-Jouet and the best smoked salmon in the world. We walked briskly, were bowed in, and an exquisite little man greeted George affectionately, whipping waiters to our service with a snap of the fingers. The champagne was very rare, deep amber in colour, with only the ghost of a sparkle. Brown bread, much butter, red pepper, a half-salmon to carve from, even a lemon.

## SALESMANSHIP

'You can't beat simple, straightforward grub,' George said: 'Remember those trout we caught and fried?'

I did. Somewhat bitterly, I reminded him of the unwritten letter:

'You promised, you know. I was depending on you. Might have altered the whole course of my life if you'd written favourably.'

'Ah, yes, old boy. Awfully sorry and all that. Fact is, it's a long story. I *meant* to write. It's always the same, can't pull myself to it. Let me explain. I'll begin right at the beginning. You see, it's like this.

'As a boy I went once with some other laddies on a cherry-stealing jaunt. It wasn't stealing really. Just an old neglected orchard and the cherries going begging. We were a bit impatient. The cherries weren't ripe, but the birds were scoffing 'em wholesale and I suppose we thought there'd be none left if we waited. We had a vague idea they'd ripen up once we picked 'em.

'Well, we picked plenty, bushels of 'em, and when we were all loaded one of the gang had an idea. He said they'd ripen quick in a glasshouse, and how about spreading 'em in Colonel Montask's big old house. The old boy would never know; it was his gardener's day off and who cared, anyway.

'So we lugged the things about a mile and ended up in the Colonel's glasshouse, all safe and sound. There was nothing growing in the place and it was as hot as China inside. We spread an old tarpaulin and tipped those cherries out, sitting all round, waiting for 'em to ripen.

'We waited a long time too. Every now and then we'd reach for a cherry that seemed to have improved but they tasted just as hard and sour as ever. Then we had a large-sized shock. Young Haley had made a



mistake about it being the gardener's day off and we looked round presently to see the old chap in the doorway, fierce as blowing bugles. He was an old soldier and he had us beaten from the start, marching us up to the house for the Colonel to handle.

'The Colonel was a rum 'un, fond of his little joke. He looked like castor-oil and brandy, mixed. He called us into his study one at a time to tick us off. I was the last one and by the time he called me in I was pretty badly corked. I'd been wondering what the hell was going to happen, what my father would say, pinching cherries and all that. Never been so frightened before or since.

'Well, you'll be surprised, but nothing happened. The old boy knew he'd scared us into righteousness and his little sermon didn't hurt at all. But here's the point. His study was papered with old postage stamps, millions of 'em, all in pretty patterns, and that's the reason I can't bear stamps or letters. I hate being reminded of what I felt then. Damned silly and psychological and all that but there it is.

'Well, well, this won't do. How are things with you? Good!' He beckoned a waiter and reached for his wallet: 'No, old boy, I insist. After all, I do owe you something.' It cost him plenty. The waiter backed happily away with sufficient surplus to buy champagne and salmon for himself. George offered and lit an excellent Turkish cigarette: 'By the way, I'm off to America in the morning, ship to Lisbon and then on by Clipper. Pretty good fishing out there they tell me. I'll make an effort and drop you a line later on. Done me no end of good having a chin with you. Sorry I've got to rush, but they're making me a Colonel or something just to ease things, and the War Office wants to be sure I can carry the weight. . . .'

## SALESMANSHIP

A handshake, and he was gone. He won't write, of course, but it's easy to see how he sells bridges. And, by the way, I've just remembered that he told me in Ireland that he spent his boyhood with his scientist father at South Georgia, where cherry trees are certainly unheard of.

## THE WOODEN UNCLE

UNCLE CHARLIE was dying. We all knew it. He knew it, too, but it wasn't bothering him very much. He was a big, proud man before his heart weakened, strong as rushing pigs as he'd say, and with a laugh like a fall of coal. He was a fine carpenter, too, although there wasn't much call for fine work in the village. Farm jobbery, coffins, wheelbarrows and ladders kept him busy when he should have been making kings' furniture, carving great beauties, but he didn't care so long as there was a living in it. There was the same perfection of finish about all his work, whatever it might be; he just couldn't help doing it perfectly right. That was why we called him the Wooden Uncle. Always at Christmas and on birthdays he'd have something made for us, a high stool chair just our size with our names carved, a sailing boat, a doll's house for my sister with everything made to work and tiny, veneered furniture, or a rocking horse maybe.

His rocking horses were all different and marvelously lifelike, all modelled and named after some winning horse he'd backed. He was a great gambler, all or nothing and no excuses or wailing if he lost. That was why our elders did not think a great deal of him for all his kindness to them and us.

Until his illness he'd lived alone in a little wooden nutmeg of a cottage alongside his barn-size workshop. There were stacks of neatly roofed timber on all sides, oak and elm and ash and walnut too, more than he could ever use, but bought simply because he could not refuse fine wood of any sort. There were many handsome bits of furniture too in the workshop loft, roped with cobwebs and thick with snowy dust like an ice-

## THE WOODEN UNCLE

bound sailing fleet, only waiting an idle moment for repair and sale. But he never did have an idle moment it seemed.

The cottage itself was very neat and clean. Even my mother could find no fault. She had come to look after Uncle Charlie since he would not go to hospital. She hadn't wanted to bring me, but I was tiresomely convalescent after some childish illness and could not easily be left behind.

I think Uncle Charlie was glad I had come. He always asked for me after the doctor had gone, to take away the taste as he said. He didn't like the doctor; he was too solemn and fussy.

'You'd think he had the ten commandments in his bag! Too bloody condescending! Regular old Mother Hubbard. More physic, red for encouragement. God bust him! He's not honest enough to come unstarched and tell me my ticket's about due. I bet he's never gambled a bob in his life. Which reminds me, boy, there's a horse running to-morrow that can't be beaten. A real whistling beauty. I want you to put this on for me, just between ourselves, mind. Just you slip down to old Perryvent's after grub when your Ma's resting. He'll know what to do. It's about a ten to one shot, tell him.'

And Uncle Charlie reached awkwardly back to his trousers hanging on the bedrail, finding four half-crowns and a sixpence, almost the last of his money, giving all to me:

'Walnut Will is the name. Don't forget, and the sixpence is to buy yourself a cigar. He's a good horse. I've been following him for a long time. He's due for a day out. Don't tell your Ma though. She don't agree with it. Meself I reckon it's good to take a chance on something you can't help one way or another, it's like

## THE WOODEN UNCLE

chucking your hat in the air just for fun, or barking down a fox hole. And maybe it does the horse a bit of good to have someone really believing in it, not just for the sake of the brass. Don't forget, Walnut Will. Here's luck to him!'

And he grinned and took a swig, not of useless medicine, but of ten-year mead from a jar tucked conveniently under the bed. The lift made him puff a bit but he only swigged deep with half-shut eyes, wiped away a dribble and asked did I remember that time he'd shot at a rabbit sitting under one of his beehives with a pistol?

'Got him with the sixth ball, didn't we? But, by God, it made that beehive a bit draughty! Look out, son, here's your Ma. Don't forget, Walnut Will.'

Old Perryvent was the village saddler and shoemaker, crippled but cheerful and busy as a woodpecker and with a laugh like one, high and sudden enough to startle. His lean-to shop was small and low and muddly, but curiously snug. He used to sit on a wide oak bench beside a square, pulpit-like stove, his crippled legs stiff under his leather apron, everything within easy reach around him, lamp, clock, account books and pencil on a string, pipe and tobacco tin, boots and shoes, bends of leather, boxes of brads, toe-irons and studs, whetstone and parrot-beaked knives, leather bootlaces hanging like the tail of a horse, stacks of old newspapers and racing calendars, and, out of place as a magpie in church, a telephone. The telephone was not common then, but Perryvent used it confidently; it was his magic carpet. The village was large and straggling and the amount of betting carried by old Perryvent and his telephone was past belief. He made a small, plucky book himself, hedging his worst bets by telephone with bookmakers on the course.

## THE WOODEN UNCLE

Small and wizened, old Perryvent had been a jockey himself in his young days before the accident which crippled him. He had begun as a saddler, adopting shoe-making and cobbling for the sake of his book, because in this way his shop became naturally open to all, including the many housewives with a shilling to gamble. Not a very sinful business because old Perryvent often helped the needy with a bit of advice to his own detriment. But that suited his philosophy too, to gamble a bit on folk. At least, that was what Uncle Charlie said.

He was cobbling busily when I pushed open the door of his shop. He looked for shoes in my hand, then blinked as he tried to remember work done. But I held out the four half-crowns:

'Uncle Charlie said to put this on Walnut Will for him, running to-morrow.'

'Oh ah. And how is your Uncle Charlie?'

'About the same.'

Old Perryvent sucked his cheeks and shook his head: 'Poor old Charlie. But he's been a sporting one. Walnut Will?'

'Yes. A ten to one shot, Uncle Charlie said.'

'Maybe. You never can tell. A nice horse but not quite enough spirit, not enough of the do or die stuff. But then Charlie always did try to wish some of his own pluck into his horses. Tell him I'll attend to it.'

'Thank you, Mr. Perryvent.' I hummed and stuttered: 'Could you put this sixpence on for me too?'

'Ha! You've been drinking from the same pint pot! Of course, m'boy. We'll put it all on together, a round half-guinea, a nice, gentlemanly figure.'

'Do I have to do anything else?'

'Not a thing. You just leave it all to me.'

And, chuckling still, he raked around for a chunk of

## THE WOODEN UNCLE

hardbake. 'Just in case Walnut Will falls down you'll have had *something* for your sixpence.'

Very happily I went back to tell Uncle Charlie it was all fixed. He looked very tired as if he had indeed wished some of his strength on Walnut Will.

'That's the grand boy! And you put the sixpence on too! Well done! It'll skate the race, you see. I know. Um tiddley um.' My mother had just come into the room: 'It'll be all right, Mary, if the boy takes my boots down to old Perryvent's to-morrow afternoon for repelting? I shall want to get round to a bit of digging presently.'

My mother nodded, suddenly wet-eyed, for she knew as well as Uncle Charlie that he'd do no more digging, that there'd be others digging on his account.

I took the boots away and spent hours cleaning them, thinking all the time of Walnut Will and Uncle Charlie's faith. Even if the horse lost, that faith was surely worth something. I tried to think what the horse looked like and the way I saw it was a prince of a horse. That night, in my makeshift bed in the tiny back bedroom I dreamed excitedly, prayed for a splendid victory. Walnut Will must win for the sake of Uncle Charlie. Everything depended on it. A win would set Uncle Charlie on his feet again; he wouldn't be able to stand a loss. All his hope was in it. Walnut Will *must* win.

The next day was like toothache and Christmas Eve all at once. I went up to see Uncle Charlie after breakfast. He had great chuckling hopes for Walnut Will:

'The course'll be perfect for him, son. He likes it hard. He's a pounder. He gets sad when the going's heavy. He likes to raise a bit of dust. You'll see. I *know* he'll do it. Come, boy, don't look so thundering worried. Just you pop off downstairs and have a look

## THE WOODEN UNCLE

at that beehive under the quince tree. There's something wrong. One or two of 'em came through the window this morning, looking for me. They look all washed out, no real buzz in 'em.'

Glad of something to do I went down to the beehive. The bees seemed muddled, just as if they were worried, too, about Uncle Charlie and Walnut Will. I poked with a stick but they did not rise and sting. I tapped on the hive — it was beautifully made and painted, a perfect little palace — and, as if I were God, a bee larger, more slender than the rest crawled wearily out. It was the queen. For a year or more she had lived busily in darkness and now the sunlight must have seemed like heaven to her. A dozen bees clutched and jostled her, but she crawled slowly to the edge of the board, quivered a bit and fell dead to the grass. Desperately, with sugar syrup and my own living breath, I tried to coax her back to life, but it was no good. The bees buzzed and drummed in circles like broken toys.

I showed my mother the dead queen:

'We'll ask Uncle Charlie where we can get another queen to replace her when he wakes,' she said consolingly.

It was late afternoon before Uncle Charlie awoke. Then he only stayed awake for a moment. We heard a heavy step and a bump. My mother ran upstairs, came slowly down again. I had put Uncle Charlie's boots on the table all ready to take to old Perryvent's. She took them and put them away in a cupboard, her face white and pinched.

'Uncle Charlie's dead,' she said: 'You must go for the doctor and then on to Perryvent's, get him to telephone your father.'

I didn't know what to say or do. I wanted to spit and cry. I buried the dead queen in a flower pot and



## THE WOODEN UNCLE

went stormily down to the village. The doctor's house-keeper sniffed: 'About time too and no loss either, if you ask me.' I did spit then, all over her black silk apron and I dropped some dung in the can of milk by the gate and hoped it would poison both her and the doctor.

Putting off the moment when I must speak what I knew I hung about outside old Perryvent's shop before going in. When at last I pushed open the door he looked up smilingly:

'Well, m'boy, you're in luck.'

'Uncle Charlie's dead.'

'Dead! God damn!' He laid aside knife and leather and seemed to be looking for something. He went to get up, forgetting his need for crutches, falling back with a crash: 'God damn!' he said fiercely.

'My mother wants you to telephone to my father, tell him.'

'Yes, boy, all right. I'll do it.' He made an effort for my sake: 'Well, I suppose we've all got to come to it, but Charlie deserved a bit longer. I reckon he knows all about Walnut Will too by now. A grand race, Walnut winning all the way. Twelve to one, so you've six, sixteen, six to come. Here it is, all ready.'

'But I don't want it now. What shall I do with it? Couldn't we put it all on Walnut Will another time?'

'Same old pluck, but there's not a chance, son. Walnut fell down after he passed the post. He's dead, too, of a heart trouble.'

I swore a bit and Perryvent talked consolingly: 'Better take the money. He'd be glad for you to have it.'

So I took it, tying it in my handkerchief, tucking it inside my shirt, rambling back by the longest way possible, slinging stones at harmless cows and clipping

## THE WOODEN UNCLE

the heads from wayside plants. It was dusk when I finally got back and supper was waiting, bed too.

'Your father will be coming for you early in the morning so you must get some sleep. You're not afraid to sleep up there?'

I said I wasn't a bit afraid. Anyway, although I kept this to myself, I had to see Uncle Charlie just once more. Maybe he would give me a sign as to what I should do with the money. Maybe there was another horse I could back. I wasn't exactly looking forward to it, but neither was I frightened. I told my mother I would like a light in my room and she brought a big, glass-bodied lamp, turned low. With little comforting heaves she tucked me in, going herself downstairs again to write letters and tidy up.

Although I wasn't afraid it took a long time to screw myself to the point of leaving the comfort of bed. But it had to be done. With the money in one hand and the lamp in the other I tiptoed to the door, listening high and low, then went slowly on across the creaky landing to the door of Uncle Charlie's room. It was very quiet, too quiet. I was afraid the door would open on to nothingness, that I should fall and fall, maybe for ever.

I bit my lip, remembering Uncle Charlie's warmth. *He'd* never allow such a trick. Fumblingly I pushed open the door and the lamplight swung bravely ahead into the room. All was sound and solid. Uncle Charlie was covered by a sheet and the room smelt reassuringly of soap and camphor. His clothes were folded on a chair and I felt sorry for them. I didn't know what to expect, but I think I hoped for just a tiny echo of Uncle Charlie's voice, neither sad nor jolly, but thinly pleased about Walnut Will and ready with another horse, another certainty since he'd gone where all knowledge was.

## THE WOODEN UNCLE

I put the lamp down on the round bedside table, the money too, all of it, neatly spread. Then, teeth tight and breath held, I turned back the sheet so that he might see. Uncle Charlie's face was an ugly stormy purple, his eyes bulged and staring. I gaped in horror, backing hastily away. The bedside table rocked and fell noisily. The lamp smashed with a loud egg sound, oil splashing, smoke curling. A moment of snatchy darkness, coins rolling like frightened bits of lamp, then the oil flared suddenly, whipping like flags in an unnatural, upward blowing wind. I ran shrieking from the room.

My mother must have thought of nightmares. She called sharply up, then came running. She said not a word, but hurried me downstairs, wrapping an old coat round me, pushing me out into the yard, pumping water, running back. But she could do nothing. She came out of the cottage like a startled bird, her hair singed, her hands and apron blackened, clothes bundled in her arms. The upstairs windows cracked and burst. The thatch hissed and smoked, flaring suddenly.

My mother gave me clothes, all wrongly mixed.

'Dress now, quickly.'

She was crying dryly. I began to tell her how it had happened, but she nodded without understanding.

'Quick now and run to the Furnival's. . . .'

She wanted me out of the way, but I kept on with the story, shouting above the hiss and crackle of the flames. She pumped desperately, but the well was low and the pump too slow. I brought another bucket, forgetting that it leaked, and she filled it to waste again and again. The Furnivals had seen and were coming quickly. We heard the men's boots in the lane. They shoved us gently back, but they could do nothing. They brought a few bits of furniture out and thanked

## THE WOODEN UNCLE

God the wind was blowing away from the barn. Then they came and watched with us.

'How'd it happen?'

'Just an accident. The boy upset the lamp.'

'Well, that's the way it had to be, I reckon. Charlie's past caring anyway. Don't fret yourself, Ma'm.'

Old Dinah Furnival led us away down the path to the farm. I stopped to tie my dragging bootlaces. I looked back. Flames were leaping high, like running horses, galloping fast. I thought I heard a voice, Uncle Charlie's voice, crying them on. But it was only the crying of his old black cat, following us down the path. It stopped and gazed with me. I explained that Uncle Charlie was riding away on those flaming horses. The cat seemed to understand and, suddenly, I too understood. I felt a bit sick, but very happy. It had all been meant to happen this way. All those horses Uncle Charlie had believed in had come to carry him to a high home. That was what belief was for, unexpected and only worth something to those who had it. It was a hell of a muddle and yet very clear. Uncle Charlie had been saved all the misery of a funeral because of his belief in horses, us too. He was gone cleanly, at the gallop, just the way he wanted to go. Walnut Will, me, old Perryvent, we'd all helped, without knowing, and I guessed there and then that most right things were done that way without knowing, and all the wrong ones with too much knowing.

I began to laugh and shout, glad I'd helped Uncle Charlie so well. My mother called back in alarm, but I did not answer. I was too busy promising Uncle Charlie that I'd believe in horses and things just as he had.

## DEMOCRACY ON WHEELS

MICHAEL BOYLE saw the car first. Michael always was a suspicious fellow, apt to see crime and passion in the most innocent things. But it did seem, on the face of it, that he might be right this time.

Riding his latchety bicycle, he came desperately in search of Constable Pilch, seeking reward and glory and justice done without delay. As it happened the constable was sitting very comfortably on my porch, helmet off, tunic unbuttoned, and a mug of cider in hand. He'd simply come to inquire if I'd seen anything of a missing maiden, knowing very well I hadn't. But there, it was his duty to inquire everywhere, and he liked cider more than most. The day was hot too, summer on a plate, as he put it, and he'd been far and wide, so he said, looking for the maid, who, as everyone knew, had merely eloped to London with a travelling man and not been murdered at all. Still, routine must be observed.

So it was that Michael, knowing Pilch, and with a taste for cider himself, found us. He slung his bicycle into the hedge and came galloping up the path, puffing deeply, seeming curiously disjointed in the fuming heat.

'It looks like robbery!' he bawled, the words ripping like a charge of shot through the peace and quiet: 'There's two of 'em. They couldn't have come by it honestly.'

'Come by what?' Pilch fanned a fly lazily away.

'Why, the car! It's one of them Rolls-Royces, a big, open one, all shine and leather. And those two rogues are rolling round in it, buying up old iron! The back of the car's full of old muck and there's a bit of a board

## DEMOCRACY ON WHEELS

on the front: WE BUY ANYTHING. FAIR PRICES GUARANTEED. YOU CAN TRUST ISAAC QUITTY.'

'Quitty?' Constable Pilch considered the name from all angles: 'Never heard of him. Any address?'

'Not that I could see.' Michael accepted some cider gratefully: 'They asked me if I knew anyone with old iron to sell and I sent 'em on to Willard's.'

'You did, hey? A Rolls-Royce, you say?'

'Hundreds of pounds' worth! Using it to collect old iron. It don't make sense! Must've been stolen.'

'Can't be sure of that, although it do look that way. I suppose we'd better check up on 'em.' The constable sighed at the thought of more labour: 'You showed 'em the way to Willard's?'

'I did.' Fortunately Willard's was only two puffs and a half away: 'If we hurry we can catch 'em red hot. Old Willard likes to talk and he's lashings of old iron about. I didn't tell 'em he reckoned it was worth its weight in gold.'

'Ah well, here goes.' The constable buttoned his tunic regretfully: 'Coming along? I might be glad of witnesses if they get a bit awkward.'

There were tyres to be pumped all round, another drop of cider to help recovery, and then we were on our way, Michael leading like an Indian chief into battle, riding his bicycle as if it were a truly wild mustang, the two of us following more gently, the constable resentful of peace-destroying criminals and Michael's urgent inquisitiveness, myself curious and amused.

We found the car outside Willard's farm gate. There was no one about and we had plenty of time to examine it. It was certainly a handsome and expensive thing, with neat monograms on the well-kept enamel, and silver vases and ash-trays all over the place, although dignity was ruined by the old fenders, bed-

## DEMOCRACY ON WHEELS

stead rails and rusty angle iron piled high in the back, plus one leaky hip-bath wedged on top like the throne of some decrepit, machine-age king. Secured between the great headlamps was the rough-painted notice Michael had described, incongruous as a mutton bone in the hand of a beautiful woman.

We were still looking it over, Pilch writing a laborious description in his book, when a fat, rolling tub of a man in odd, soiled clothes and dirty white canvas shoes, came ambling back from the farm, whistling serenely. He was not in the least disturbed by the sight of us, only grinned amiably, wished us a good morning and what could he do for us?

'Your name Quitty?' Constable Pilch straightened his helmet on his sweating brow.

The fat man nodded happily as if he liked to hear his name spoken so roundly. He took a half-smoked cigarette out of his greasy cap, asked for a match and lit it in one swift bunching of hands.

'About this car now?'

Quitty looked it over appreciatively: 'Nice little lot. A treat to drive, quiet as daylight. You don't want to buy it?'

'No,' said Pilch shortly: 'All I want to know is how you came by it. It's not junk by a long chalk.'

Quitty smiled in a slow, broad, enjoyable way: 'What you mean is you think I pinched it, eh? And you want to see me birth certificate, whether me ears wag and all the pictures in the family album. Lumme, what a world! Well, I didn't, see? And I don't like it! Hey, Henry! Where the hell's he gone . . . HENRY!'

The name went bounding over hill and dale, powerful enough to disturb the very mice in their holes. There was a long pause, a cracking of twigs, and a quaint, whiskered, very old man came stepping daintily

## DEMOCRACY ON WHEELS

through the hedge, rubbing sleep from his eyes, brushing the nap of a curly-brimmed bowler hat on his sleeve. He stared at us.

'What's all this about, Isaac? You haven't been finding things again?'

'Lord lumme, no!' Quitty chuckled all over, tossed his cigarette over his shoulder and bowed solemnly: 'Allow me, gentlemen. This is Lord Henry himself.'

'Lord Henry!' Pilch nearly fell over in astonishment, recovered himself and said sternly: 'No time for fooling.'

He would have said much more, but Lord Henry checked him with a flap of the hand, stiffening perkily, evidently unaccustomed to having his identity questioned: 'Of course I'm Lord Henry!' He took a card from a little leather case: 'My card. Now what is it you want?'

Pilch was badly muddled and I explained gently, doubting no more: 'It's about the car. It just seemed a little peculiar, if you understand me, sir.'

'Peculiar? In what way precisely?'

'Yes, they think I pinched it,' Isaac said briskly.

'Absurd! Of course the car is mine. Nothing peculiar at all. Just a convenient arrangement. I may say I resent this inquiry, but as I gather that the constable is merely doing his duty it is equally my duty to assist with an explanation, however distasteful that may be to me.' Lord Henry's tone was very correct and frosty. There was no longer any doubt that he was a gentleman, even in the stolid mind of Pilch.

'The position is this, my dear sirs. Taxation had made it impossible for me to run this car. I am an old man, with but few pleasures. It gives me very great pleasure to be driven around. Isaac drives in the fulfilment of his business; a much better driver than any chauffeur I ever had too, if he will forgive me for saying



## DEMOCRACY ON WHEELS

sq.' He inclined his head slightly towards the beaming Isaac: 'He also pays the tax and buys the necessary petrol, and I am the passenger. An excellent arrangement, I assure you.'

It needed time for Pilch to accept a truth and situation of such unusual quality. He gulped, scratched his ear with the writing end of his pencil, leaving a strange scribble, stuttering pathetically, and again I had to deputize:

'Our apologies. I do hope you understand that the officer was merely concerned for the public benefit. . . .'

'Of course, of course. No bones broken. I can see that the situation might appear a little irregular, but then these are irregular times. Good day to you. Shall we go, Isaac?'

Isaac was already sitting placidly at the wheel. He reached across and opened the door for Lord Henry. He saw Lord Henry feel in an empty waistcoat pocket, frown a bit and step in, conscious of being unable to complete the matter in his accustomed way. Handsomely and understandingly, as it seemed, Isaac saw the need. He beckoned Pilch across, pressing something into his sweating palm. A touch of the starter and the engine coughed in a discreet manner, running sweetly. A formal nod all round and they were gone.

Pilch still couldn't understand it all, still felt he'd been fooled. I said the truth was always thus, that he should be proud to have seen democracy functioning so smoothly, democracy on four wheels instead of crutches, but he couldn't see it. Michael demanded to know what Isaac had given him, prepared to claim at least half. Pilch opened his hand. In its thick horny folds was a plain, flat brass button, and, looking at it, I felt he deserved no more, that it was perfect payment for coarse, hob-nailed suspicion.

## BAD LUCK FROM BRAZIL

It must have been near six o'clock when I was surprised by a tremendous shout from a corner of the orchard. The day had been fine and soft and still as only late summer days can be, so still that one could almost feel the sweet hanging balance of the earth, and the sudden call was like ice slipped into the mind, brutally disturbing.

'Hi, guvnor! Lend us your gun, quick.'

A straying, holiday-minded cockney from the town beyond the downs, I thought, who had seen perhaps a fox or a badger and wanted to kill it out of curiosity, give it 'what for' so that he might poke and joke and enjoy its strangeness. I had been clearing away the twigs — some with queer ghosts of leaves still clinging to them — and beetled debris remaining from an old wood-stack and a gun stood handy in readiness for the rats which I knew to be snuggled away somewhere beneath together with about a hundredweight of my best potatoes which they had taken advantage of my careless storing to steal, or harvest, according to the way you look at it. Irritably I called back a refusal but the voice became more insistent, pleading quaintly for 'just a lend of it to fix this 'ere Brazil bird'. Interested at last, secretly glad to delay the slaughter of the rats, I took up the gun, treading through the strawberry-scented bracken to see the cause of such excitement.

Stepping through a squeeze-me in the hedge I jumped the snaky trickle of the stream into the lane and at once the shrill, towny voice begged me to 'take it easy, guvnor, for gawd's sake, else the perisher'll 'op it!' Ten yards away a thin, harassed-looking fellow in the shabby uniform of a railway porter was standing

## BAD LUCK FROM BRAZIL

foxily, pointing a grimy fist towards an oak tree, where, strangely, the Brazil bird, a most magnificent red and blue macaw, was perched squarely, busily interested in a squirrel-hoard of nuts.

'Kill 'im, guvnor, for the love o' Mikel!' he wailed, his beaky face gaping anxiously.

But I shook my head very decidedly and wondered who had lost the bird. I had long ago reached a decision as to killing; if it were something eatable, all right, otherwise, rats only excluded, let them go to give or find death in their own way. This I explained briefly to the excited porter, urging a reasonable attitude, asking why he wished the death of so beautiful a creature. Miserably angered he stood, stuttering and gulping, his cheeks puffing froggishly.

'Lord lumme, guvnor, you don't understand. Ain't I lost me job through the perisher? Ain't they bad luck right from the egg?'

Painfully serious he was and sober, too, although his torn trousers, dusty boots and sweat-streaked face at first suggested intoxication, a man chasing some fever-bird of his brain. But the bird was alive and no figment. Still seeing no reason, however, why it should die I again shook my head, whereupon the fellow marched pugnaciously forward, as if intending to snatch the gun from my hands.

'Ain't you been killing what you've a mind to, ain't you? So why shouldn't I, eh? You with all your bright-boy talk of loving-kindness! 'Ave some sense, man! Ain't you ever seen bad luck coming and wanted to cork it before it got you proper? Well, that there bird is all bad luck I'm telling you.'

Made cautious by all this talk of bad luck and with no wish to appear in a coroner's court as a result of an accident I unloaded the gun and laid it aside, foolishly

## BAD LUCK FROM BRAZIL

juggling the cartridges while I pondered how best to quieten such truculence. But his fighting front was faked to deceive me. A swing of his fist and he had knocked the cartridges from my hand, scraped one up and grabbed the gun, skipping by me, lifting it awkwardly, fumbling at the breech, snapping it shut upon the cartridge, sighting at the macaw in a way that seemed likely to dislocate much more than his arm, firing and staggering backwards like a pushed candle, then running gleefully forward as the bird fell from the bough in a rainbow flurry of feathers. It was not quite dead; its feathers bunched and quivered in glowing agony but a stamp of a heavy heel drove all life from it and in a moment a frenzy of flies were at it.

'Take that, and that, you screechy bastard! No more bad luck from you, anyway. All boxed and finished and no more traipsing!'

Angrily I took the gun from him, near to turning it upon him. But, the bird dead, a meekness came over him and he screwed his fingers into his deafened ears and found words of apology.

'Sorry, guvnor, about the rough stuff, but I just 'ad to snuff 'im. All day I've been on 'is tail, looking for a chance to stop 'is cunning games. And I reckon you ought to be grateful, so you ought, me sweating this way to save you and everybody a dose of bad luck. No kidding! Them there birds 'ain't got no business in a civilized country and my old man would tell you the same.

'Brought one from Brazil once, 'e did, and the damned thing 'ooked one of 'is eyes out clean as a cherry on the voyage 'ome. They bunged it in the furnace, just to settle it, and all the birds in a 'undred miles seemed to know it and came shrieking all over the ship till everyone was next door to crazy. Afore

## BAD LUCK FROM BRAZIL

they knew where they were the bloke at the wheel 'ad piled 'em on a reef and drowned a dozen. *That's* the sort o' luck that's in 'em, I'm telling you; all alike too, every 'opping one!

'Take this one 'ere. This morning 'e was sitting pretty in a blooming great skeleton of a cage back there on number six platform, at the terminus. You know it! Course you do! Well, there 'e was, like a Chinese parson, all set and waiting for the 10.28, carriage paid, addressed to some old girl at Roman Heath. I 'adn't seen 'is like before, but I 'ad 'is number all right, you bet. My old man 'ad told me a bookful about the one 'e 'ad.

'Anyway, one or two of us were looking 'im over and 'e was taking a smart eyeful of us at the same time, if you understand me. Now and again 'e'd screech a bit like a jammed-on brake and take a climb round the cage, beak and claw and all upside down though 'e seemed to think all right any way up. Funny sight, though 'e didn't mean it to be funny. That climbing must've been 'is private way of making up 'is mind.

'Some of the chaps were feeding 'im things, laughing and teasing 'im with bits of coloured paper and a puff or two of smoke and I expect 'e was thinking 'e'd show 'em what 'e really could do presently. Now and again 'e missed their fingers by 'alf o' nothing and back 'e'd sit ripping the guts out of that coloured paper just to show 'em the way 'e worked. 'E seemed to listen, too, to what we said and round and round 'e'd climb again as if 'e was wrapping it all up, bending that slice o' tail of 'is in a nasty sort of way, sort of sharpening it against the bars.

'And then — would you believe it? over 'e flops on 'is back to the bottom of the cage, sudden-like, flat in all that muck. Blink, blink 'e goes like hammering a nail

## BAD LUCK FROM BRAZIL,

out of sight and looked like dead. We poked 'im a bit just to make sure and I thought we'd been and gone and killed 'im with all that smoke and paper. It looked like as if 'e was choked or something and someone said we ought to 'ook 'im out and 'ave a look down 'is gizzard.

'I was the mug, of course. I'd 'ad so much to say about me old man's bird they thought I knew the lot and expected me to operate. Couldn't 'elp meself y'see. A bit dubious-like I borrowed a glove and opened the door and shoved me 'and in, expecting blood and thunder in a manner of speaking. But 'e didn't move, not a sniff, not even when I grabbed 'old of 'im and lugged 'im out. 'E looked dead and 'e felt dead and 'e smelt dead but 'e wasn't no more dead than a stick o' dynamite! I'd 'ardly begun to look for something to open 'is beak when 'e opened it 'imself and took a chop at my finger. I dropped 'im quick, you bet, and 'e 'opped and screeched and ran like blazes, shaking 'is wings till they remembered 'ow to fly. 'Op, flap and screech and away 'e kites to a girder under the roof, sitting pretty like a bunch of flowers.

'Busy time of day that, y'know, and it weren't long before a thousand or so people were standing and staring up at that bloody parrot. No moving 'em on, any'ow. Just like a circus to 'em, no charge, laugh as much as you please. A couple of bookmakers laid the odds and started collecting bets; ten to one it would still be free in 'alf an 'our. And so it was, 'aving a fine old time fighting the pigeons and screeching like a pair of roller-skates.

'No shortage of damned silly suggestions from the crowd, either. Salt on 'is tail, a plate of nuts and a butterfly net, ladders and I expect they'd 'ave said snakes too if they'd 'appened to think of it. Nothing

## BAD LUCK FROM BRAZIL

workable if you get me. Feeling 'ungry that damned bird just dived for the fruit store by the bookstall — I expect the colours 'ad a 'omey look to 'im — snatched what 'e fancied, paid for it with a scratch on the beezers and off again to the roof.

'Someone 'ad tipped the wink to the station-master by this time and up 'e dodders all important. Somebody gives 'im the truth of the matter near enough and I'm sacked in a jiffy. Then 'e bends 'is brain to the problem of capturing old Brazil. Most of the services were disorganized by now and something 'ad to be done. The crowds wouldn't budge an inch. Just like a tonic to 'em, especially when a steeple-jack and a couple of acrobats from a touring company tried their 'ands. Nothing doing there though. That bird just skipped out of reach and seemed to like it.

'And then the station-master 'ad a look at the cage and read the label and by and by 'e dictated a telegram to the owner: Come at once; short and sweet and desperate, y'know. Some old colonel bloke offered to shoot Brazil but the station-master couldn't 'ave that. Breach of contract; claim for damages, etc. There were a bunch of newspaper chaps round 'im and 'e 'ad to be dignified and lead-kindly-light.

'So they just 'ad to wait, and presently the old girl telephones that she's coming by the next train. And so she does and the parrot just sits pretty where everyone can see 'im, pleased as Punch, beaking 'is feathers and waiting for something to 'appen, something 'e *knew* was going to 'appen.

'And it 'appened all right. The train was signalled and a line cleared and in she steams but the driver was a bit bothered by the crowd and spent 'alf a minute too long looking to see what all the excitement was about. With a merry 'ell of a crash the engine bumped the

## BAD LUCK FROM BRAZIL

buffers and the old girl who 'ad come for 'er parrot, standing eager-like on the carriage step, was thrown off and broke 'er neck, snap, just like that!

'That gave 'em something else to think about. Blood and bumps and busted windows. But I kept me eye on the parrot and see 'im fly out of the station all pleased and satisfied with the way 'e'd worked things. I owed 'im one, y'see, and I 'adn't a job no more so I romps away after 'im and a fine old dance 'e's led me, over the 'ills and far away! But I managed to keep up with 'im and now 'e's fixed and settled. I guess that's the way of it, guvnor. 'E won't be making any more bad luck unless maybe 'e chokes the cat that finds 'im! You never can tell. A rum old go, ain't it? If you'll take my tip you won't touch a feather even else 'twill be thundering bad luck for you too, bad luck from Brazil and no mistake about it, believe me! So long!'

And I did believe him for it seemed that here was cause and effect in close, unpredictable connection, a hint of scheming beyond our knowledge. Or perhaps you'd prefer to call it mere coincidence. Anyway those brilliant red and blue feathers were found by a child who made an Indian headdress of them and, wearing it, crawling in earnest play along a hedge, was shot dead by a hunting farmer exactly a week later.



## LORD FLICK

MOST people thought my Uncle Daniel was mildly crazy. He liked them to think that, too, for it saved a lot of explanation and gandering about, as he put it. Actually he was wise and generous, logical and happy, and marvellously exact and successful at his trade. He was a gunsmith, exceptionally tall and thin, so that he looked somewhat like an overflowing bottle, with his wildly tangled grey hair, long white face and black leather label of an apron. It wasn't a lemonade bottle, either.

He had a tight little basement shop in a corner of the market square, a cat and a parrot for company and a room at the back in which he ate, read and slept, undisturbed by crowding books and metal. He chewed tobacco constantly, drank strong tea by the gallon, liked musical boxes, and lived sumptuously on all kinds of game in season brought by those of his customers who valued him truly, baking and boiling very efficiently on an old range in the back room. He was pretty particular about his customers, too, as I saw for myself one day when I went to collect a salmon he had promised my mother. How he came by the salmon I never knew, but there it was, hanging high in the back of the shop with a great bunch of parsley, as if it were waiting to be married.

Daniel was filing away at his bench under the smudgy window. There was a dab of grease on his thin, hooked nose, a quid of tobacco in his cheek and his spectacles were shoved up on to his forehead. The parrot chuckled in time with the door-bell as I entered, Daniel looked up merrily and nodded towards the tin in which he always kept a store of hardbake:

## LORD FLICK

'Help yourself. No hurry, I suppose? Just want to get this pin squared up. Nice morning if you're not too particular. Not married yet, I suppose?'

He always asked this, although I was then only fourteen, and I always answered him no, but that the prospects were good.

'Well, don't leave it too late. The earth won't be round for ever.' And he went on filing slowly and evenly, puffing the filings explosively away, the parrot watching closely from its perch on the tool rack as if he were making some special parrot toy.

When, suddenly, the door-bell jangled once more, Daniel looked up, jerked down his spectacles to get a better look, seemed on the verge of extreme rudeness, thought better of it and wiped his hands briefly on the seat of his trousers. A very stylish young man in bright check jacket and breeches looked him up and down, looked at me, at the cat and parrot and the hanging salmon, and then, dubiously, at the guns in their racks:

'Good morning. I want a shot-gun, a good one.'

Daniel winked slyly at me: 'Indeed, and that's a nice thing to be wanting. Had you anything special in mind?'

'No, except that it must be exceptionally good.'

'All my guns are exceptionally good. Shouldn't bother to make the other sort.'

'No doubt. I was recommended to you, you see.'

'Ah, yes. And by whom, may I ask?'

'I really forget now, but it's not important. If you could show me what you have.'

Daniel slung a roll of felt testily across the counter, reaching here and there, placing guns for inspection, slightly more amiable when he saw that the young man handled them competently, but far from jovial. He grunted prices, hummed a bit to himself and obviously

## LORD FLICK

didn't give a damn one way or the other. The young man looked them all over and was not satisfied. It was not a question of price, he repeated; it was just that he knew exactly what he wanted. Daniel certainly doubted that. The parrot made a noise like a boiling kettle and Daniel sucked his teeth loudly. The young man looked round the shop once more:

'What about that one there?' He pointed to a sleekly shining gun in a corner.

'Ah, that,' Daniel looked at it thoughtfully. 'That's what I call a Lord Flick,' he said. He picked it up and handed it over: 'Story attached to it. There are six exactly like it. Best work I ever did. It wasn't a question of price there, either. Made 'em for a chap called Dewey Ansell. Best poacher I've ever seen. I've seen plenty too. Nice people, all of 'em. Dewey was a quiet, gentle little chap, brainy as a bunch of bishops. Always worked by himself with a couple of dogs that could damned near talk. He could clear an estate in a couple of nights and no one the wiser. Wonderful work, all smooth and knowing and never a fumble.

'Keepers used to come and go, but none of 'em could ever get a finger on Dewey. Owners used to get stamping desperate. One of 'em got tired of it and hired a chap who was supposed to be the smartest keeper on legs. Boastful chap, too, and Dewey thought he'd bottle him in a stylish sort of way, swift and sudden. Dewey had an idea that game should belong to all and not to just a few; he used to give half his bags away to cottage folk, but you couldn't expect the moneyed ones to see the rightness of that. Anyway, Dewey weighed it all up, waiting until this particular owner was away for a day or two. Then he turned up on the estate one morning, smoking a good cigar and

## LORD FLICK

all toggled up like a gentleman, with a fine pair of borrowed guns, shooting stick, cartridge bags and London-made cartridges, a luncheon basket and a friend from up-country to act as his servant and "sir" him all along the line.'

Daniel smiled at the memory and the parrot swore at a passing fly:

'Not boring you, I hope?' Daniel said, and went blandly on without waiting for a reply: 'Dewey started shooting right away and up came the keeper like a ton of fireworks. Dewey wished him the top of the morning, said his friend the owner had suggested he might like a trot round, and that the keeper was at his service. His manner was perfect and the keeper hadn't a doubt, especially after Dewey told his man to give him a swig from the brandy flask.

'Very impressed with Dewey's shooting, that keeper was, glad enough to point out the creamy spots. He was more impressed still by the lunch. Dewey had done that in top style too, cold fowl, potted fish roe and well-bred biscuits, oyster pie and champagne, and a first-rate cigar to finish, enough to make anyone's teeth dance.

'Come afternoon the place was damned near cleaned up, a couple of hundred brace of birds and the best day's sport Dewey ever had. He was pretty well pleased and he told the keeper so, told him it was only right to show his appreciation. Gave him a couple of sovereigns as a tip and sent him off up to the house for the brake to carry the stuff home. They didn't wait for the keeper to get back, naturally. Just loaded the stuff into a spring cart they had waiting under cover and cleared off.

'The yarn got around all right and Dewey was Lord Flick from then on. Flick? Ah, that's just a name for

## LORD FLICK

bits of fur and feather. The keeper got the sack, but Dewey found him a better job up-country. The owner was a sporting old cod in his way. He worked out the best thing he could do was make Dewey his keeper. He was a business man and he asked Dewey what the job was worth. Dewey was averaging four quid a week then and that's what the old boy paid him and no soreness anywhere.

'They got along pretty well together too. The boss was a lonely old bird for all his brass, and Dewey made life fresh and merry for him all over again. They even used to go on the poach sometimes, just for the fun of the thing, and when the old man died he left everything to Dewey.

'It didn't alter Dewey any, though. He shut up the house and lived by himself in one of the lodges, eating and drinking well and wearing the same sort of clothes. He had a tidy cob and trap and plenty of dogs, all he wanted. He'd time to think too and he got round to thinking what he'd wanted most as a youngster and that's when he came to me. He wanted some guns made, the best possible and the cost didn't matter. He wanted 'em to give away to the most promising youngsters round about, start 'em right. This is one of the guns.'

Daniel handled the gun somewhat sadly, I thought. The young man lit a cigarette yawningly:

'M'yes, very interesting, I'm sure. Best sales talk I've heard in years. Means at least another tenner on the price, I suppose. How much?'

Daniel placed the gun very deliberately back in its corner. It looked as if he were grinning in the dimness, but when he turned he was scowling angry.

'I am not accustomed to being insulted in my own shop!' He scissored swiftly round the counter. 'Out!'

## LORD FLICK

spinning the young man forcefully towards the door. The door-bell jangled, the young man yelped as Daniel kicked him hard in the backside, and Daniel returned, smiling gently to himself.

'Don't forget to help yourself to the hardbake,' he said.

I didn't understand.

'Knew he was a wrong 'un,' Daniel said. 'Sales talk! That's as far as their minds go. Put him in the wrong all right though, didn't it? Good story, didn't you think?'

'But wasn't it true?'

'All lies, m'boy. Well, maybe not quite that. There was a Dewey and he did shoot up a place in grand style. But they jailed him for it good and hard. He died in jail. Nice chap. That story was what should have happened. Ah well, it's a lousy world, sometimes. How old are you? Old enough! Here, take the bloody gun, it's yours, present from me. We'll wrap it up to make it look like another salmon. It's one I made to give Dewey when he came out. He borrowed those guns and shooting bags from me and that young nutmeg's father was the magistrate who put him away....'

## LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR

HENRY lived alone in a tight little barn on the top of a green hill from which the sea and a sleek seal-shaped island could be seen on one side and far-away sloe-coloured moors over which the clouds roamed like monstrous sheep on the other. Half the time he was very happy, half the time very sad, for he was young and earnest and troubled by the everlasting need for money and the blindness of folk to the green beauty of earth.

At the foot of the hill lived the farmer from whom he rented the barn, a coarse, lusty giant of a fellow kindly towards Henry as a healthy man might be towards a crippled child. Not that Henry was visibly crippled. He was a poet, you see, and wrote little verses and papers on flowers and birds and the wickedness of staghunting and suchlike weeping waywardness as Farmer Gabworthy once put it.

Whenever Henry received a cheque he always asked Gabworthy to cash it — not merely because he wished to impress, mind you — and the farmer always suggested Joe Prater of the Golden Horn as being much more likely to be able to manage it and off they'd go together in the farm tumbril, Henry forgetful of his resolutions, of books and birds, and debts and daisies, filled only with a most royal strength and faith and goodwill towards all men. Smiling Joe Prater would give a little cash and much liquor for the cheque, and round about midnight Gabworthy would tuck the rhetorical, starry-minded Henry into his barn, wish him an affectionately abusive good night and rumble away downhill to wake his wife and tell her a few of the things Henry had said, to her great amusement,

## LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR

for they had never met before, in church or out, anyone so large in spirit and so wanting in common sense.

'Fish nor fowl,' as Gabworthy would declare solemnly: 'A harp without strings except when 'eem drunk and then the liquor do seem to go straight to his head and burn like a torch so that his eyes do shine like a cat's by lantern light and his tongue clap and dance like a frog in a pot!'

Sadly in the morning Henry would wake to the late and disordered chiming of his three grandfather clocks, bought impulsively at village sales, and count his few remaining pence, resolved to ration himself strictly till his soul was purged and inspiration renewed, writing and rewriting with the absorption of a monk until at last another poem was ready for sale to some despised but wealthy periodical. Then the same thing would happen all over again.

Not that Henry was a mountebank, a cold-blooded burnisher of the obvious. He was perhaps weak by worldly standards but his sense of beauty was very real and acute. Small things moved him intensely so that it seemed no rash dream that he might one day write a book which would in turn move the whole thinking world to a new and intense realization of beauty. Often he breakfasted on a vision, waking to physical appetite only when the smell of chitterlings or baked rock-fish was wafted upwards from the farm kitchen. Then he would eat bread and cheese ravenously and dream of the meals he would order when he was famous, meals perfect in their way as any poem, falling asleep to the soft cooing of the doves in the loft, never thinking of roasting a brace to provide a banquet on the way.

A complicated fellow, you see, unlike you and I. Sunrise or sunset from the hilltop filled him with an inexpressible joy and sight of a fox romping in clumsy



## LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR

time with the trilling of larks was an occasion for a holiday. You might argue that his whole life was a holiday but that would merely show your unawareness of the subtle anxieties constant in an artist striving desperately to reproduce, to accentuate for our better understanding the shape of bird-song, the master-glow of colours, the green harmonies of leafage and the skirling, cloud-tumbling drive of the winds; of one reaching towards the inner meaning of all creation, unnecessarily you may say, for there it is in all its unalterable substantiality, but remaining, nevertheless, an urgent concern for one so sensitive as Henry.

On this particular morning he had risen early, not from any inner compulsion, but because sleep was difficult now that the starlings had hatched their young in the loft. Going in the dewy freshness to gather watercress from the brook at the foot of the hill, pleased with the ponderous, galloping chime of the church clock in the valley and the scurrying flight of rooks from the square tower, he was startled by an odd cry: 'Hoop-hoo! Hoop-hoo!' clooping harshly from a nearby tangle of gorse. Thrilled but scarcely daring to believe in its truth, imagining a minor bird gone husky, he approached stealthily to within a horse-jump of the clump, seeing beyond a large, handsome, crested bird which was tossing a worm high before catching it in its long curving beak and gulping it. Enchanted to the point of lyricism Henry breathed deeply, incautiously, and at once the hoopoe took alarm, hopping and flying away uphill, brilliant in the clear morning light.

Overjoyed, as if it were a prince come visiting, Henry followed warily, circling towards the barn, scattering books and papers in search of his binoculars, thanking God that he had not been forced to pawn them again. With trembling fingers he adjusted the

## LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR

screw, focusing the glasses upon the bird as it hunted proudly in a patch of newly broken ground in which Henry had thought to plant flax for the sake of its misty blue flowers and had been restrained by Gabworthy who had no wish to see his hill-meadow ruined and made like a patchwork quilt.

Forgetful of breakfast, of the poem upon which he was working — a quaint thing concerning an aged carpenter engaged on the erection of a new oak gatepost, warranted to last a full century, who prays that he might see its rotting and be again employed to replace it — and of the wetness of grass upon which the rising sun was shining so that it seemed as if the bird was guarded by a thousand spears, Henry lay in pure, open-mouthed ecstasy, watching every movement of the rare and handsome bird, musing on its journey from some tropical coast, delighting in the way it tossed the larger grubs high before swallowing, in the thoughtful quivering of its splendid black-tipped crest and sturdy rake of its long black bill in the rich red, faintly-steaming soil.

Half an hour passed and the hoopoe still searched and fed diligently, strutting with becoming dignity, the sun bright on its tawny nape and glistening blue-black and white-barred feathers. Sometimes it tossed dust briskly over itself, spreading its wings as if in worshipful gratitude for the sun, shaking itself carefully clean. Henry explored the hillside for a possible mate, careful that the sun should not flash in his glasses and disturb beauty, but he could see no other.

The sounds of the village came clearly on the still air. Now the ring of an axe and the clank of a pump, now a gaily singing voice and the rumble of a wagon. Milk pails clanged in a dairy and someone banged a pan to attract a wandering swarm of bees. Once a

## LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR

hovering arrowing shadow caused the hoopoe to flinch and huddle close to earth so that it seemed no more than a trodden rag-doll. The hawk gone and danger past it rose again with a soft, gurgling cry, preening itself to a new sleekness, bright brown eye quick to see creeping food.

Watching intently, poetry bubbled in Henry's mind. He would write an epic, glorify, immortalize this beauty. Planning triumphantly he was startled by a near gun-shot. The bird hopped quickly into flight and Henry cursed Gabworthy as he bent over a dead rabbit at the foot of the hill and prayed that he would go away, that the bird would remain safely on the hill-top. But the hoopoe, circling high, swerved gracefully downwards, unaware of Gabworthy as he stood under the spreading hedge, looking all ways for a fancy shot.

Foreseeing tragedy Henry leapt to his feet, waving his arms to deflect the bird. But the movement only served to attract Gabworthy's attention. Straight went the bird towards the hedge and Gabworthy peered and cocked his gun. Frantically Henry began to run, shouting as he went, 'Don't shoot! By God, if he does I'll smash his skull, by God I will,' he swore. Like a scarecrow before a wind he ran but too late. An explosion and the hoopoe flopped dismally to earth. One more for the glass case!

Henry ran on, murder in his heart. But his foot caught in a rabbit set and he went sprawling. Scrambling painfully to his feet he went on, fists clenched but dull doubt in his mind. The fall had brought him to earth in more senses than one. Beauty was dead, what was the use of fighting? Gabworthy stamped to meet him, holding up the shattered bird, grinning delightedly:

'One more for the glass case and a rare fine 'un too!'

## LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR

'I was running to tell you,' Henry blurted. He felt suddenly very sick and ashamed and helpless, too weak to bear ridicule, defeat. What could he do against this grinning, confident, universal beast to whom he already owed much money and from whom he must certainly borrow more? 'I'm glad you got him,' he said. 'I was driving him towards you. Good shot.'

'Aye, 'twas a rare good shot. Thankee for driving 'un so well. Thou'rt a good neighbour, sure enough. Puffed 'ee flat, so it has! Better come in house and have a rest and a bit o' elevenses with us. Thee've earned it, anyway. Come along with 'ee now, m'dear. . . .'

And Henry went.

## FOXY'S TROT

I'd spent a lot of thought and money too on a wedding present for young Jesse Burney and I was a bit startled and annoyed too when it came back with a short, blunt note: 'There won't be any wedding.' I went down to the village straight away to find out why, for he wasn't one to change his mind easily and without good reason.

Jesse has a tidy little farm and can make money where others would starve. But he wasn't making a profit when I found him, only a loss. He was sitting gloomily on the granary steps with a bottle of whisky and a rook rifle, shooting his own tame pigeons as they pitched on the roof of the barn. He hadn't hit the roof once, either. He'd a fancy for pigeon pie, he said truculently. He guessed he was a bit of a pigeon himself and would I have a drink? There were seven more bottles to go. I sat down beside him, not liking the look of things at all.

'What's the trouble; has Rosy cried off?'

'Oh dear no! She's as anxious as ever.'

'Then why?'

Very sarcastically Jesse asked had I joined the detective force all of a sudden or was it just a natural inquisitiveness? I said all right, to hell with him and Rosy too, acting like school kids, and what about passing the bottle. I had to reach for it myself, for Jesse was sulking. There wasn't much above an egg-cupful left but I was glad of it. I slung the empty bottle across the yard at a skulking rat and Jesse sobered suddenly, all the brakes hard down.

'Guess I'm acting daft. Ought to know better. It's a back-handed sort of yarn but you might as well know. I'll have a cigarette if you've got one. Thanks. . . .'

## FOXY'S TROT

He smoked half of it in deep sucking breaths, then let the rest smoulder away between his fingers, forgotten. It was quiet in the yard, the sunlight a bouncing ball between fast-running clouds. Sometimes a snaky breath of wind drove straws in wild panic. Chickens reappeared jauntily now that the shooting had ceased. Old Joe, the foreman, peered anxiously round a corner as if afraid that Jesse had shot himself, then went quietly away, his gumboots pounding on the cobbles like the gloves of tired boxers.

Jesse cursed when the cigarette burnt his fingers, grimaced round at me apologetically and shoved back his thick, uncombed hair:

'I don't suppose you remember old Foxy Wishpin. (I did, but it seemed better not to interrupt.) He's been knocking around for twenty years now. Not much need to explain the Foxy, either. He's just like a tough, grey old fox to look at, quick in the eye and lazy with the cunning of years. Long head, straight mutton-bone nose, thin, buncy carcase, corduroy pants and damned great clouted boots. You know the kind. Middling straight too and likeable if you weren't too particular.

'He never moved faster than a cat with kittens, as they used to say in the Independent Tallyho. You'd see him ambling through the lanes at any old time, smoking a stumpy, home-made cherry-wood, looking for useful bits of timber in the hedges.

'He made a cock-eyed sort of living out of walking-sticks. He was a thrifty bird and lived in an old shack left over by the sawyers up on Tonball Hill, way back among the trees. Easy-like he used to cover the county three or four times in the year, selling his sticks at the markets and raffling them in the pubs.

'They were good sticks too, mostly thorn, ash and holly, some of 'em plain, some polished, some crooked,

## FOXY'S TROT

some square-headed, some with knobs carved into a bird or animal, others burnt with a hot poker into Turk's heads and lovers' knots, all of 'em seasoned and cheap. Sounds like a sales talk, but it's true.

'That old thatched shack up there on the hill was stuffed full of sticks seasoning off, all kinds, some hanging with weights to take out the kinks, some rough, some finished, hundreds of 'em. There was a straw bed in one corner, a tin box for grub, a wooden vice or two, a tin pipe for steaming crooks, and not much else.

'A queer sort of life when you come to think about it. But old Foxy always seemed middling happy. He was a master poacher too and was never short of a bit of tasty meat. The keepers waited for him often enough, but they never caught up with him. They never found a feather, or a bone, or a snare in the shack either, which shows you how neat and clever Foxy was.

'I suppose in a way he was a bit of an artist, although I haven't much use for that kind meself. But some of those carved walking sticks of his were damned well done, birds and things, true as life and all done with a penknife and a bit of glasspaper. He didn't think over-much of them himself, to give him credit. It was a useful sort of knack and that was all and I reckon no man's got a right to think better of himself than that.

'You could never get to the bottom of Foxy. He never talked much and never bothered to answer awkward questions. He'd always choose his time to come to the Independent pretty carefully, just about half an hour before closing time, with everyone merry and ready for a gamble.

'He'd stand in the doorway like a grandfather clock come to life, if you know what I mean, three or four walking sticks under his arm, looking round cheerfully, his rusty bowler hat tipped to the back of his head. A

## FOXY'S TROT

general sort of nod to all, then a special smile for Rosy as she drew a pint for him. It was always on the house too, that pint, but no one thought much of that. He'd lay his sticks on the counter while he drank and there were always one or two quick to look at the carved heads and ready to buy. But Foxy would shake his head:

"Reckon it's up to Master here," with just a pinch of a wink at old Eli behind the bar: "Can't be making a shop of his place, can I now?"

'And old Eli would pretend to consider, making a favour of it all round although he knew it meant good business for him: "All right, Foxy, make it a raffle as usual."

'And all of us there, twenty or more as a rule, would part with threepence apiece and fight it out at the dart board, three darts each, the first man scoring over a hundred in three throws claiming first choice and so on till the sticks were won. Quite an amusing set-to. And when they'd done and the drinks were ordered to toast the winners, Foxy would pocket the stakes with a "Thank you, gents, one and all", and accept another pint from Rosy as if he'd earned it. Everyone was satisfied and most times Eli would say:

"Now, Foxy, show us how you'd have gone about it. Bet you an ounce of 'bacca you can't do it again."

'It was an old game and custom between them and Foxy always played up: "Don't know as I feel up to it to-night, Master. If you'd said matches as well as 'bacca I might have had a crack."

'Eli would grunt a bit and rake out a box or two of matches as if he hated parting with them. Foxy would wink at Rosy and choose his darts, standing back. One, two, three, slow and easy, and nine times out of ten there would be three treble twenties to show. It was worth watching, believe me. Foxy was always pretty



## FOXY'S TROT

humble and modest about it, making us all feel we could do it too if we tried. It was decent too the way he never would join in a match. He'd have swept us every time. I used to wonder how he came by the knack, but he never would say, just shrug and grin a bit down his nose.

'Some of the chaps used to chivey him a bit, but he never got mad with anyone he knew. You'd think he was a butler who knew his place. I used to think there was no puff in him at all till the night some town chap swore his dart-throwing act was a fluke and bet five bob to one he couldn't do it again. He insisted on seeing the colour of Foxy's money, too, which wasn't very gentlemanly.

'I can see Foxy now, counting out the coppers he'd made on his sticks, slow and easy, and Rosy telling him not to worry, slapping down a shilling of her own on the counter. Foxy didn't even bother to choose his darts carefully, just grabbed half a dozen and ambled back, throwing them smartly, packing four into the treble twenty, the fifth into the bull and the sixth plunk through the thumb of the towny where it overlapped the bar. It made him howl, us too, for he'd asked for it. Foxy didn't say a word, only shoved the five bob across to Rosy with her own shilling, downed the last of his drink, nodded a general good night and ambled off. I thought a whole lot more of him after that.

'One night I followed him out and asked him if he'd carve me a stick. I wanted one for old Fortescue, the lawyer. He thinks I'm a rat and I wanted him to know what kind of animal I think he is. I wanted one of a dormouse asleep, you know, tail curled up over its face.

'Foxy knew what I meant all right: "I'll try," and he scratched his ear: "Male or female?"

## FOXY'S TROT

'I had to laugh and we left it at that. A month or two slipped by and I near forgot all about it what with fixing things with Rosy. I saw Foxy once or twice, but he never mentioned the stick.

'He hadn't forgotten though, for he came hopping into the Independent late one evening with just one stick in hand. He'd been hurrying and was in a rare hurry to go, the first hurry I'd ever seen him in. He nodded to Rosy and Eli and looked round till he saw me, romping across with the stick.

' "Always keep a promise," he grinned and the way he said it it went for me as well as him, and he shoved down the stick and was off across the parlour to the door before I could get in a word edgeways.

' "So long, Rosy. Look after yourself. So long, Eli, and thanks for you know what."

'And he hopped away through the door without waiting for a drink even. Rosy seemed a bit bothered and wanted to run after him, but Eli spoke to her and she nodded and stayed put.

'I had a good look at the stick. It was a beauty, of thorn, the dormouse curled snug as could be, near enough like old Fortescue in bed if he had a tail. It was perfectly done and I was aiming to show Rosy when I noticed it was a bit wet and darker than it should be, just as if it was a real mouse bleeding to death.

'It was blood all right too. Either Foxy had hurt himself or used the stick to hurt someone else. I remembered what a tearing hurry he'd been in and I wondered what the trouble was. Besides, I owed him for the stick. I thought maybe if he'd walloped someone with it it might be wiser to smash and burn it. I just had to know, anyway, so I chased after him out of the pub.

'He was well on his way when I got outside. I could

## FOXY'S TROT

hear the trot of his lumpy boots on the Benport Road and I ran, bawling to him to ease up.

'The boots stopped trotting and Foxy grunted a bit: "What's the trouble? Can't stop. In a hurry."

'I was making all sorts of guesses why he was in a hurry but I didn't let on at once.

' "It's about the stick. You've made a good job of it. I'd like to settle for it."

' "No need to settle. Have it for a wedding present."

'I didn't know what to say to that so I hopped on to the main thing: "Have you hurt yourself or taken a crack at something? There's blood on the stick."

' "Aye, there might be." He wasn't slow or rattled, but he guessed what I meant and laughed in his dry old way: "Did you think I'd been on a killing job?"

' "Couldn't be sure. It looks a bit that way. It's the first time in ten years you've moved fast or left the Independent without a wet. I thought maybe you'd swiped one of those gamekeepers."

' "Good guessing. But you're wrong this time. I'm in a hurry all right. Got to be at Benport by daylight. There's a circus chap there I got to see. I used to be a circus-hand and here's me chance for a ticket to South America."

' "You mean you're going for good?" He was on the move again and I swung along with him: "But why, after all these years?"

' "No need to stay now, that's all. Reckon you might as well know, seeing you'll be one of the family. Rosy's my daughter and now you're marrying her I'd only be a damned nuisance, knocking around rough."

' "Rosy!" I was knocked pretty wide I can tell you.

' "Aye. You wouldn't have thought it, would you? But it's true all right and I'm asking no favours. Eli will tell you. He's been a real good sort. The muck on

## FOXY'S TROT

the stick was where I tapped six brace of pheasants for the wedding party. Eli's got 'em safe. Old Boxall saw me at it. Reckon he's waiting up at the shack now with the sergeant. But Rosy's got her pheasants. They'll eat well, too, the plumpest I've ever seen. I'm on my way. Don't want to muck things with a court case."

"Well I'm damned! Guess I was a fool to be thinking you'd clout anyone."

"Maybe not." I could hear him thinking and grinning: "I did for Rosy's mother fifteen years back with a stick too, just like you thought. I had to do it, to give Rosy a chance. I buried her up on the hill and good riddance too. One man wasn't enough for her; she had to have half a dozen. Don't tell Rosy though, or anyone else. Might be awkward. So long now."

'And off he trotted down the road. I sat down to work it out. It was a double-barrelled shock all right. I felt like smashing Eli for not telling me. Then I thought he'd only been doing his best for Rosy, helping her chances by adopting her. Couldn't blame him. Then I got round to Rosy. She should have told me if all the things she'd said meant anything. She'd caught me all right. I began to remember all sorts of little things then, the generous way of her, how she wasn't quite so particular as I'd have liked, excuses and things, you know. Like mother, like daughter, easy-going, too easy for me.

'I went back to the Independent for a drink. I meant to have it out there and then, get things straight. I knew how Foxy felt all right. It wasn't too good. The pub was shut. I went round the back way, looking for Eli. But I found Rosy first. She was standing by the barn, talking and laughing with some fellow. . . .

'And you cleared off without even finding out who the man was?'

## FOXY'S TROT

'What's the use? I'm not aiming to share her.'

'You're a damned fool, Jesse. You deserve to lose Rosy. A damned, idiotic, jealous fool.'

Jesse stood up quick and straight: 'You seem to know a lot about it.'

'I should do! I was the fellow. I came to get Rosy's ideas for a wedding present.'

Jesse stared, half-thinking I was making it all up to cover Rosy. I began to laugh: 'Do you know what she suggested for a wedding present, wanting to please you? Why, a pair of guns! But I said a wedding present should be useful to both.'

'So what did she choose then?' Jesse was interested once more.

'Well, we had a lot of talk. But look here, didn't you even bother to open that parcel? Well, you don't deserve one of the nicest pairs of guns I've ever seen, that's all I can say. You don't deserve Rosy. Yes, that's the sort of girl she is. She insisted on giving most of her savings to help pay for the guns, so that you should have something you really wanted. . . .'

## DEAD DOG

THE old dog had been weakening for some time but still the moment of death was tragically unexpected. Day after day the tramp had watched her drag wearily at his heel, grey muzzle drooping almost to the dust and her eyes fogged and sunken, and he had walked more slowly in sympathy, stopping often that she might recover strength. Gratefully but feebly the dog had licked his anxious hand, resting her heavy head on his patched knees, panting and blinking and sighing tremendously. And Gulpy had scratched and shaken his own grey head and tried to cheer her with gentle talk, begging dainties from cottage wives, stuttering and gesturing wildly: 'Ddddunno what I'd ddddo widdout un.'

And that was God's honest truth for they had tramped together for nine years, true as saints, up and down the country, enjoying the queer food which came their way and the sun and the rain too and the merry loveliness of all creation, sleeping out from dusk till dawn when the weather was right and finding a stack or barn when it rained or froze, uncomplaining at all times and very grateful for small mercies. No tricks for pence, mind you, for Gulpy wasn't that sort. Thin necked and meek-eyed, shy and humble, his ideas were nevertheless good and right. Tied, however, by a miserable, nervous spit and stutter from talk with any but the most kindly he had turned in his loneliness to the beasts of the field and to them, surprisingly, his talk was easy and natural as bird-song itself.

He had found the dog in a chalk-pit one lucky morning, piled like a snail on a difficult ledge, terribly bruised from a fall and with only a puff of life left in

## DEAD DOG

her. Very patiently, with green oils and the cunning rub of his hands he had healed her, carrying her in an old basket till she was well, teaching her to walk again as God might have taught the first of His creatures. Just a liver and white, smooth-haired bitch of no particular breed but with a good sort of life in her. Knowing and everlastingly grateful she'd been, a comfort to Gulpy and a queen in his eyes, fond of cheese and sugar, mixed, and with no liking for a bone unless Gulpy had touched it first.

Hard to believe that it was all finished. But there was the dead, empty body. She had just stopped walking and flopped on her side with a tired, puzzled look. Snorting a bit she'd tried to rise but her legs were strangely stiff and cold. Desperately Gulpy had rubbed them and encouraged her with lively words, running for water. But when he returned her head had fallen and flies were crawling busily on her grey muzzle.

A terrible thing to happen when you hadn't much else to turn to. Sitting under the thick summer hedge Gulpy pondered miserably, hopelessly, alone in an immense stillness. He had never thought much about death before except to wish it for himself in early days. A simple matter it had seemed then when he had nothing to lose. Year after year he had watched all nature die and be born again but he had come to feel that it must be different where there was love, that love could not just die like a summer flower. But it seemed that he was wrong. Love was only a greater warmth which lived in the body and died with it. Death was the same for all. You fell off your perch and that was the end of you, unless you were lucky enough to remain in someone's memory. Not so almighty bad for those who snuffed it; it was the ones who were left who tasted the acid. Still, there it was. You had to make the best

## DEAD DOG

of it when you hadn't the courage to follow. No good feeling old and empty. Must just potter on and hope something sweet would turn up.

Slowly and carefully Gulpy scraped and dug a hole with a bit of rusted hinge, hating the raw smell of earth, knowing what would happen to the dog once it was folded under. But then it happened to all. Must be a rightness in it somewhere. Soberly he lined the hole with some ferns from the hedge, lifting the dog upon them and sifting the mould gently back, trying not to think too much. But he was not allowed to finish for a great stony voice came startingly from behind the hedge.

'Hey, you! Not so fast!'

A bumping and crashing and a sweating giant of a fellow broke through, standing threateningly over the kneeling Gulpy, slapping a shiny-leathered calf with a whistling thin cane, demanding explanation:

'Whose dog is that you're poking under? Answer up, now!'

Gulpy stared up in meek bewilderment, cowed by the bowler hat, smart breeches and fine, homespun jacket. Gesturing confusedly he stuttered out the truth of the burial but the farmer did not believe.

'Looks like the dog of a neighbour of mine. Out with it!' And he kicked with his heavy boots, uncovering the dog: 'Aye, so 'tis, I swear, and poisoned, too, by the looks of it. A crime that will be and some stealing mixed up with it, I bet me! Along with 'ee!'

Sick and tongue-tied, Gulpy was driven down the lane to a small neat farmhouse, and the farmer called loudly for someone to watch over Gulpy while he himself went for the neighbour. But the house was quiet and empty, the yard too, and the farmer swore a bit, roughly searching through Gulpy's pockets before



## DEAD DOG

hustling him into a tight little barn in which was chained a powerful, hungry-looking, red-eyed mastiff.

‘Watch him, Peter!’

Loosing the dog the farmer locked the door on them both, striding away in angry triumph to investigate.

Crouched in the dimness tramp and dog eyed each other. Gulpy laughed crazily and the dog growled deeply, viciously, knowing what its punishment would be if it allowed this odd-smelling stranger to escape. Rocking on his heels, not caring overmuch about the turn of things but hurt by the bristling antagonism of the watchdog, Gulpy presently began explaining quite calmly and simply what had happened to his own dead mate. The dog sniffed gustily, disturbed by the friendly smell and the quiet, gentle voice. After a little while it sidled close and smelt the peaceful hands, and the smell of the dead, once-happy dog took root in its brain so that it allowed the hands to rub its drooping ears as they had never been rubbed before. Suspicious again after a moment’s delight it looked sideways, expecting, perhaps, a brutal trick. But Gulpy did not move, only went on talking mildly and the dog was reassured and slumped heavily at his feet, licking a bruise on its flank, continually sniffing again at the ragged clothes and swinging hands.

For a long time they sat so, Gulpy brooding on this last injustice. They were constantly accusing him of something or other, misjudging and harassing him at every turn; might just as well give ’em something worth chewing over. And a splendid thought came to him then, a thought which he explained to the dog by signs and words.

‘What about it, Peter, boy?’

The dog whined and sniffed, distrustful no longer, excited by the smell of old Gulpy, wanting to run, to

## DEAD DOG

play, to act as it had acted before boot and stick had checked it. Scuffling back into its corner it began to dig and bite furiously. Laughing gleefully, Gulpy followed, straining at the worn, chewed planking. A great effort and the wood cracked apart and sunlight glowed like a helping hand. At once the dog bounded joyously through the hole, turning and waiting. A scraping and squeezing and Gulpy was free too. Checking the dog with a soft word he went cautiously out of the yard, across one field, then another, and so into the security of the forest. And the dog romped in merry freedom, obeying Gulpy in every word so that he laughed to think what might happen to any who dared to arrest them on their happy, chosen way.

## JUGGERNAUT

FOR many years Timothy Finacre of Caudle Bottom had been a collector of worn-out machinery. He was a blacksmith by trade and believed implicitly in his power to mend and improve on original designs. But in thirty years success, not unsurprisingly, had hardly winked at him. Still he tinkered confidently and fearlessly with old mining gear, motor cars and farm implements, joining them together in awful grinding series but without achieving either perpetual motion or a reasonably efficient lunar clock. Fortunately, unlike his wife, he was grandly optimistic by nature. Faith was renewed each night and by his full-blown morning talk you'd have thought him a genius with all the secrets of heaven and earth under his egg-spoon. They lived a lot on eggs, you see, in the absence of other nourishment.

His wife, well aware of the danger and uselessness of most of his contrivances, seeing some new piece trundled into place outside the untidy smithy, would moan and flap her great, work-stiffened hands: 'You'll be the death of me!'; bitterly, shrewishly lamenting the waste of money and the dwindling hope of retirement. Justifiably, too, for cottage and smithy belonged to her, Tim having married her on the death of her respected father, this being, in her opinion, the one clever step of his whole life. Certainly the place had shown no profit under his management, the countryfolk finding his work altogether too fanciful and unpredictable. Furthermore the smithy stood too lonely for steady custom in a busy age. In its heyday it had paid well enough, drawing its trade from three thriving parishes upon whose borders it sat like a great flattened nailhead securing them together. But farming had declined and

## JUGGERNAUT

Tim couldn't be trusted to make a simple repair of any sort of machine. 'I can improve it!' he'd swear blandly, sucking and puffing at his tin-capped pipe, and I believe he'd have said the same if you'd brought him a Rolls-Royce.

Lonely they lived in that bleak, west-country valley, where not a bush grew that the sheep hadn't dwarfed with their cropping, Lydia brooding fiercely, tired of bleakness and thin living, tempted to leave the good-for-nothing Tim, to settle with her chickens in some tidy, sheltered spot where machinery could not enter. Urgently she prayed at nights for a purchaser for cottage and smithy, nagging at Tim the full day long so that he found excuses for pottering far afield in quest of something really worth improving on, something that would make a prodigious fortune to be handled at his sole discretion.

He'd show her what sort of a man she'd married, begod! Make her swallow her spite, although it would make a choking mouthful by now, so unreasonable had she become. But then women were always like that; no bigness in 'em, no faith or vision; an incomprehensible brake on progress.

A difficult, poverty-stricken life it was for both of them with hardly a pleasure in it beyond the eating of eggs and the dreaming of vain and foolish dreams. At least Lydia's dreams had seemed vain and foolish even to herself until, one fine autumn morning, a passing shepherd called two bits of news to Tim and his fretful wife as they ate their eggs and drank their unsweetened tea. The railway company were thinking of extending their line through the valley to the coast and the effects of a travelling bankrupt circus were being sold with other gear that same day in the market town.

Immediately and joyously Tim reached for his stick

## JUGGERNAUT

and tobacco pouch, contradicting his wife briskly when she said that no worth was in circus stock of any kind, marching away over the hills to the market-place. Even if he didn't buy — and he didn't see how he could unless he stumbled on a purse of gold on the way — he'd have the rare pleasure of inspection and maybe the opportunity of advising purchasers, of suggesting and securing contracts for improvements. Hadn't he always wanted to be a circus boss? Maybe someone would buy the lot for him to work to success. Watching him go Lydia flapped her hands murderously: 'You'll be the death of me,' and sat down to consider the ways of railway companies in relation to obstacles in their path, reaching presently for her bonnet.

Prudently late that night Tim returned home, sick at heart but undaunted. He had seen valuable gear sold for trifling sums to stony-minded commoners who had ridiculed all his suggestions without hesitation. It hurt him deeply to think of all that fine metal lying unimproved. For twenty pounds he could have bought a most magnificent steam-roller and for another ten a dozen iron ostrich cages complete with ostriches. He could have made a training ground and race-track with the roller and started a new industry and entertainment. Bird races to fill in the blank times when hare coursing was impossible, and a steady supply of two-pound eggs, 'every egg a banquet'. A fortune in sight but all lost for lack of money and encouragement. A hard world to be sure . . . Gloomily he stumped between masses of rusting iron to the cottage, astonished to see a light still burning below, unprepared for Lydia's strange smile as she looked up from the packing of china. Why wasn't she abed?

'What's been happening?' he asked conciliatingly.

'We're moving,' Lydia told him brusquely: 'I've

## JUGGERNAUT

sold this place to the railway company and bought a slice of Friendly Valley t'other side of town.'

'For how much?'

'That's my business.'

'Maybe so, but what will I be doing? Have you thought of that?' Dumbfounded, Tim struggled for dignity.

'I have indeed,' Lydia snorted: 'I think you'll be wanting to do the same as you've always done, spending our pittance on old iron and leaving me to keep the home going. Well, you won't be needed to carry on that way. Chickens will thrive down there even if you don't. It will be snug among all those trees. I'm tired of the top of the world where the weather hits you all sides but if you don't like it you can go elsewhere. If you come you'll have to do as you're told. You and your crazy ideas! Where were they getting us, answer me that? Why you'd be the death of me if you could! I'm master from now on and there'll be no nonsense!'

'When do we move?' Tim gulped and felt as if he were caught in an ugly dream.

'To-morrow, and we're taking no old iron.'

Tim squared himself and thought of rebellion but he knew that there were no ravens in the valley to feed him. He'd have to go, be ready to take command again when she'd made a mess of things, as she most surely would. These women were all the same in thinking that they could manage things. When she came to her senses he'd start a new forge in Friendly Valley, carry all his fine machines there. Maybe there was coal or oil or something down there that he'd be able to find. Things always happened for the best, anyway, he consoled himself.

So they went to Friendly Valley, Lydia in curt com-

## JUGGERNAUT

mand, Tim silently contemptuous of her ability to succeed. The Valley was very deep and snug and lined with trees and the cottage was pretty as an apple fallen among deep grass. A stream looped sweetly past the door and Lydia promptly set the reluctant Tim to work digging a pond for ducks. The pond dug he must fell a thousand or so of the trees to make space for a vegetable garden. But Tim didn't like the idea at all. Why sweat your guts out when you could get a machine to do the job for you? He wasn't quite sure what kind of machine would be best but if one didn't exist he could easily invent or adapt something to do the work. Lydia, however, would not see his point of view, refused even to allow his right to think any more. He wanted to go back to the smithy to make a suitable engine but Lydia shook her head and her fist too:

'You'll be the death of me with your loose-willy ideas. Get busy with that axe!'

Tim grunted sourly that the axe was broken and that such a tool was insufficient for such a task. The trees were big and it was dangerous as well as awkward, working on such a slope. But Lydia had gone suddenly deaf. Very deliberately she took her purse from her petticoat and opened it:

'Here are ten shillings. Go into town and get another axe and don't forget to bring a receipt back with you.'

Tim looked and seeing a redness in her eye he took the money and went the road to town, ideas teeming in his crazy old head. As may be guessed it was not with an axe he returned. Very late in the afternoon the irate Lydia was startled by a grinding and snorting on the valley road. Running to the door she saw Tim driving an enormous steam-roller which seemed likely to explode at any moment. As a result of complicated man-

## JUGGERNAUT

œuvres it stopped near the cottage and Tim stepped down with all the pride of an admiral.

'Hello, Ma! Borrowed the old steamer to do the job. Seven hundred times as fast and she won't need sharpening. Just the thing — shove the trees, you see, and over they fall!'

'And my ten shillings?'

'I gave them to the chap just to seal the bargain.'

'God help thee for a blundering fool. You'll surely be the death of me! First thing to-morrow you'll take it back and get an axe, d'you understand?'

Tim nodded foxily, determined in his mind to give the steam-roller a trial, to prove to the doubting Lydia his undeniable wisdom. Why, in a couple of days the thousand or so trees would be felled and all he'd have to do would be to borrow a circular saw, hitch it to the roller and slice 'em into planks and logs. A small fortune in it, easily, and with any luck he'd be able to buy the steam-roller for himself.

Waking at dawn after a tranquil night Tim crept downstairs and fired the boiler and in a little while the engine was belching fiercely. Nimble he mounted and turned the roller up the slope, but something was wrong for it went slowly, painfully, like a frog in harness. Anxiously Tim worked levers and peered closely into clanking bowels. But still it only crept weakly upwards with a noise like the devil on crutches. Grabbing an oilcan Tim stepped down, walking alongside, squirting oil into bearings, avoiding sudden bursts of steam, seeking a cause of failure. A touch here and a touch there and she should have found her stride but instead, half-way up the slope, the engine stopped altogether with a dreadful grinding and spewing of metal, beginning to run backwards, Tim running too, trying to board the step, regain control. But the steam-



## JUGGERNAUT

roller eluded him, bounding straight downhill for the cottage. Lydia, watching from an upper window, flapped her hands and shrieked angrily: 'You'll be the death of me!'

Outdistanced, Tim stopped running, gaping and grunting, flinging his oilcan disgustedly away: 'My God and I believe she's right!' he muttered and, seeing that nothing could be done, began philosophically to fill his pipe. Wasn't it always the same when women took the reins and gave the orders; didn't they always make a bouncing mess of things?

## LUNATIC BROTH

My Uncle Chessie — Chesapeake Tobias Caxton was the full name and it fitted him like a crust on a loaf — was cleaning and soaking his barrels before cider-making in the great open shed at the end of the orchard, heedless of air-raid warnings or the distant sound of gunfire. It was a clear, fresh, open-handed September morning, and the sun shone warmly on the chalk-scribbled heads of many barrels so that they looked like old clock-faces giving an ample choice of time to anyone with time to spare.

Chessie had time to spare that morning. It was refreshing to see him, sound and solid, head and shoulders above the temporary stupidity of war, enjoying the job, sorting and straightening in his leisurely, peaceful way, planning ahead with a wise certainty that would have astonished and confused any pickle-brained war-lord. He was a big fellow, nicely seasoned all ways, plump and comfortable as one of his own barrels, cheerful as Christmas morning and mellow in his judgments so that it was a nourishing pleasure to weigh the world with him.

A man-high pile of good, sound apples of a dozen kinds waited by the mill, shining rosily. Cobwebs had been swept away, the press scrubbed and the great steel screw oiled, copper funnels and jugs laid ready beside the mixing butts. The engine, too, belted to the pulper, had been cleaned and oiled and fuelled and stood staunchly like a frog in harness, waiting for battle. Chessie looked at it all and reckoned he'd be ready to start at noon when his neighbours arrived with their own odd barrels.

Chessie had been making cider for thirty years,

## LUNATIC BROTH

making it carefully of a nice mixture of apples, sweet and tart, with an exact proportion of sugar, never tapping it before it had been three years in the barrel. It was a choice drink at that age, all sweetness become alcohol and the whole matured to a quality equal to that of fine sherry. It was strong, but gentle-fisted stuff, so to speak, with subtle differences of flavour, due to different barrels and seasons, that Chessie was quick to identify.

He was ready enough to do some identifying there and then from the odd gallons he had drawn off into stone jars. There were a dozen stemless wine glasses thrown out from the house on a ledge, and he filled a couple lovingly, holding them up to the light to admire the clear amber before tasting.

Characteristically, he was no bigot in this matter of cider. He made other brews besides, all equally good, although perhaps ladylike by comparison. He made mead, the real stuff from his own run honey, not miserly swipes from the honeycomb cappings, cowslip wine too — June twice over as he once called it — elderflower wine and half a dozen others. We tasted most of them in an expansive, pleasantly critical half-hour, Chessie humorously reminiscent.

‘Half a pint of this, a pint of that, a gallon or two of something else . . .’ He nodded round at the odd bottled lots, laughing suddenly in his deep, gusty way. ‘Reminds me of the go old Will Boxall had moving across the valley. You don’t know Will, do you? Well, he’s a rare good ’un at bottom, but half his life he’s been crippled by the bossing of his sister Sarah. Never known such a prickly pest as she. Always on the boss and no quarter anywhere. She used to run the farm in a way to drive you crazy. Everything had to be right and proper to look at, feather-beds-for-the-pigs sort of

## LUNATIC BROTH

thing and damn all sense anywhere. Looked on us real scornful; said we were just boozy muddlers and a hindrance to God.

'There was something about the old farm she didn't like; something about everything she didn't like for that matter, but this was deep and special. And when Caldwell's place, a couple of miles away, came empty she snapped it and arranged to move, regardless of standing crops or anything else. Poor old Will wasn't even asked what he thought about it. He didn't stand a chance either when he wanted to make a holiday of it, all the neighbours and a bunch of hay wains. Sarah wanted it done spick and proper, and she hired a high-powered city firm with pretty pantechnicons and crews in green baize aprons to do it. She was so thundering sure they'd do it right and tidy that she lugged old Will off to town for the day when the vans arrived. Even gave the men a day off, so's they shouldn't get in the way of the experts.

'They were a stiff lot of chaps, those furniture removers, clever enough with brass knobs and aspidistras, but not much good with bulls and beetroots, ye might say. They emptied the house all right, packing the stuff in the van tight as shrimps in a pot. And then they got busy on the barns. It was real funny to see 'em bundling wheeled stuff into the vans, stuff that would have run on its own. But that was the way they did things and no stopping 'em. They even bunged the cows and pigs in, and the hens too. A wonderful tidy job. I was haying alongside and nearly bust meself with laughing at their jiggling and poking.

'Will had a brewing shed much like this, but Sarah would never let him go at the job in a real masterly way. They were always trying new things, some good, some bad, so that they had dozens of small barrels half-full of

## LUNATIC BROTH

stuff which Will couldn't drink and which Sarah couldn't bear to throw away. She hadn't left any special word about the liquor. She just thought these creamy specialists would know exactly what to do.

'Well, it was a new one to them. They had tidy, average sort of minds, and they just tipped all the little lots into one big barrel, loaded up and set off through the fields. It's not an easy road, specially to a townsman; too many bends and ups and downs, and they got stuck nicely down by the ford across the river. Instead of running the vans through the stream they tried to get 'em across the clap-bridge and ended up by smashing the bridge and tipping a van into the stream. Luckily it wasn't the one with the cows in it, but the one with the barrels and dead stock. They had a noble time emptying it and dragging and towing it this way and that; it looked like an elephant's bank holiday.

'They got it out in the end round about dusk, and they must have felt middling weak and damp and strained and in need of a bracer. They thought they'd earned a swig or two, so they tapped the barrel of mixed stuff and drank real hard at it. It was proper lunatic broth, but they didn't know any better. Just kept going at it till they felt spry and ready enough to carry the vans the rest of the way and empty 'em like matchboxes.

'That's near enough what they did, too. They sorted themselves out and fairly tore into it to make up for lost time. Stuck the furniture in the house, the cows in the stalls and the pigs and fowls where they should be. Then they had one more go at the lunatic broth and went off back to town, hopping pleased with themselves.

'I didn't think much more about it till old Will knocked me up round about midnight. He was practically speechless with sweat and worry, but I gave him

## LUNATIC BROTH

a drink and got him talking. They'd been delayed by a bomb in the road, but that wasn't all. I bit me tongue near through with laughing when he told me. You see, those furniture removers had lost their bearings in the dark and dumped all the stuff back in the old farmhouse instead of the new!

'Sarah was sitting down in the empty farmhouse mad as fat in a pan. She wouldn't budge and was waiting for Will to bring along enough stuff to sleep on. In the morning she meant to get signed statements and sue the city fellows twice over. Will wanted a hand, and I was ready enough to give it, although a bit weak with laughing.

'Will had hated leaving the old farmhouse from the beginning. He was terrible sad and weepy and cussed a lot in a mutinous way while we loaded a cart with a mattress and bedding. He'd had enough of Sarah; they'd have to go their own ways. He'd stick to the old, and she could have the new. I don't mind admitting I was looking forward to the dust-up, glad to see a little spirit in old Will at last. We were all fed up with Sarah and it looked like Providence was too, for d'you know what? When we got across to the new place it wasn't standing any more, just bricks and mortar, blown to hell by a full-sized bomb. We never did find Sarah, but we did piece together that she'd made a hell of a fire to warm herself—Old Brusher Must saw the flame—forgetting all about black-out and this damn-fool bombing. Just plain selfish and unreasonable as usual, and it finished her. Makes sense, don't it, in a back-handed way?'

Chessie filled the glasses once more: 'Here's to confusion! That's what old Will always says these days. He reckons there's right and good in everything if you only look far enough ahead. Confusion's just a short

## LUNATIC BROTH

cut to something better. Better stay overnight, m'boy, and come with me to-morrow to help him with his cidering. He reckons to make two thousand gallons and sweeten a bit of the world that way. And don't forget to ask him about the lunatic broth. You'll see him laugh like twelve o'clock. For d'you know what? He's sold the recipe to a maker of patent medicine. Made a small fortune. It'll be on the market soon as a nerve tonic. Sarahsaveall is the name — it looks scientific if you don't happen to think about it — so don't forget to recommend it wherever you see a need for improvement backwards!'

## POOR MAN'S MEAT

For a number of years the Brazils, Moses and Priscilla, husband and wife by gipsy contract, had wintered snugly in the lane under the downs, their neat, well-painted caravan drawn out of the path into a space cleared of thorns and nettles by old Moses and their horse cropping meekly where it chose.

No one minded, for they were an honest pair, and it was very pleasant to see them on a bright, frosty morning, the van looking like a russet fruit, rabbit nibbled and glowing ripe, a stalk of smoke looping from the chimney, the old man and woman busy at their tasks, Moses cutting and flattening an old tin, maybe, for peg-bonds, or making nails in a tiny forge, and Priscilla, her crooked, wizened figure beshawled into false fatness, hissing quietly like an ostler as she pegged mud from pattens or the hems of her heavy drab skirts, or, perched on a topmost step, knees spread, pounding herbs for a curry, Spanish fashion, or mixing a drench for a neighbouring cowman for, though she could neither read nor write, she had a deep, inborn knowledge of such things.

In the years I knew them old Moses' first greeting was always the same, simple and pleasing as wine in the mouth. A slow, astonished blink of his merry eyes and he'd spread his brown, nimble hands as if releasing a homing bird, turning to Priscilla: 'Don't he look plump currant?' And Priscilla would nod emphatically and laugh softly, as a mouse might, her small, deeply wrinkled face wrinkling still more, while Moses, after whimsical consideration of your own inquiry, would reply earnestly, his fine teeth shining white in his scrub-bearded face: 'Just dukkering along, we are.'

And that seemed to be the simple, ample truth of it,



and, looking at them, it was a marvel to me that half the world wasn't aching to live as they did. A good, sane sort of life it must have been, not without difficulties, and certainly not romantic, since they'd always lived so, but full of renewals and everlastingly refreshing if one went with open eyes and no great anxiousness for possessions, as these two did.

All summer they moved up and down the country, lapping honey where few would think to find it, self-dependent and covering many hundreds of miles in their slow, quiet way, always contriving an unsentimental visit to a lonely breast of the Welsh hills, where was buried Priscilla's only babe, born out of time in the beginning of their life together.

Occasionally Moses sold a bag of nails to someone who valued their rose-headed excellence, earning enough to butter their bread and please their noses as he would say, Priscilla adding to the fund by the sale, or exchange for kind, of simples distilled from roots gathered in a compass round, excellent and immediate cures all of them if faith was strong, but effective still even if faith was absent, exactly as if a measure of Priscilla's own rare energy were included.

Like children they shared a fondness for a few simple sights and pleasures. They liked Southend and Land's End equally, the one for its shrimps and ample joviality, 'Like ants on a cake, the jokers there', and the other for its gulleries, grey mullet and pilchards and china clay mounds like God Almighty's own fine tents.

A rainbow was as good as gold in the pocket to them and a full moon in a clear sky, like the best of earth reflected in a great, wise eye, pleased them deeply. Summer lightning was enjoyed because it retempered the mind into new appreciation of tranquillity, 'Blazed off old thinking corns', as Moses put it, and they liked

## POOR MAN'S MEAT

paddling on lonely sand-bars and eating mountain cress and sea spinach. The chime of bells spinning down like multi-coloured petals pleased them nearly as much as a sweet echo, and they knew a hundred places where each could be enjoyed freely and privately. They would go thirsty rather than drink standing water, and liked burning rare black bog oak in their brass-knobbed stove and drinking a hot juniper brew before bedding down.

Not much harm in folk of such simple habits, you'd be ready to swear, but there were, nevertheless, a few witherbrains who mistrusted them, among them but one with the power and will to hurt. The few could be avoided, but it was the business and constant pleasure of the one to make trouble, and a pretty job he made of it in this case. And this was the way of it, so neat and simple that you'll be wondering how safe your own footing is.

Just a week before the Brazils returned to camp in the lane, the local constable, slow and murmurous as a pound of bubbling glue, died, as was expected, of pewter poisoning, and his place was taken by a heavy-fisted, scowling martinet by name of Sprenoble, a townsman of seedy origin with neither love nor knowledge of the country round, who began immediately a new-broom campaign against local crime, gaining convictions for all the petty illegalities overlooked by his amiable predecessor.

Summonses sped like infuriated wasps through the parish. Fines were paid and murder contemplated, and Sprenoble roamed daily farther afield, sniffing and snailing, finding the Brazils at last in their harbourage. Once, it appeared, he had been well japed by a masterful gipsy family, and his enmity for all such was fixed and lively. He knew the exact wording of all the

charges which could be laid against the wanderers and approached the caravan with the definite intention of making a case.

Old Moses was in happy mood that morning. He had an affection for the secluded, bird-gay lane and for the few kindly folk thereabouts. The cress planted a year ago in the brook chining under the lane had taken root and grown like wool on mutton, and he had arranged to trim an adjoining coppice in exchange for winter firing and a daily pull of milk.

The air, sweet and soft from the downs, brought youth to his thoughts, so that he couldn't help singing a bit as he chipped and shaved a handle for a billhook he had forged from an old cart-spring. Aware of the constable, he grinned cheerfully, bobbing his grizzled head, calling jocularly to Priscilla: 'Hey, wife! Get the pick and spade — you know the size hole we usually dig for a policeman. . . .'

That was all he said. For years he had greeted constables in this merry manner and they had been amused. But not so Spre noble. It was true that he smiled a bit, thinking that here was a rope with which to hang the cunning old sod. Without a word he stamped away, prepared to swear that Moses had uttered violent threats and swung the billhook with murderous intent. 'Hey, wife! Get the pick and spade . . . ' Easy enough to give a desperate flavour to such words, especially when the bench shared his distaste for the gipsy breed.

Within an hour he was back with a sergeant and a warrant, and old Moses, angered and astonished, was lugged off to jail, the wood chips still in the folds of his old cord jacket. Not even time to lace his boots!

Bail was not allowed, and the next morning he was brought before a bench of peculiarly dour-looking magistrates. Buttering the way with many unctuous,

## POOR MAN'S MEAT

'May it please your Worships . . .' Sprenoble gave evidence on oath, briskly identifying Moses as belonging to a tribe responsible for many past assaults, a tribe of everlasting poachers and sheep-maulers. A real dangerous character whose threats were never idle ones, he declared, and the billhook was produced in support of his words.

As was expected, the shining, razor-edged blade shocked the meek-whiskered bench. Moses, a shrewd judge of character, spat sadly and explained that he had used the words in all friendliness and jocularly, at which the court could not prevent a gulp of laughter.

With pursed lips and much nodding the magistrates conferred solemnly with the clerk, the superintendent winked openly at Sprenoble, and the verdict was announced by the chairman. 'Grave case . . . Three months' hard labour.'

I was away at the time to buy some wooden chains — there's a man in Kent who carves them in six-foot lengths — and, returning at dusk, days later, I was truly astonished to find Priscilla seated on my step, tightly wrapped in her shawl against the first chill of night, her face shiny with despair, seeming smaller than ever. She had been waiting all day, wanting my permission to draw the caravan into a corner of the orchard. They had ordered her out of the lane and there was nowhere else she could go.

In a hundred brief words her tale was told. Couldn't anything be done? I felt a bit sick and said I'd see; and then I went and led the sighing horse through the gateway, backing the caravan into a grassy, sheltered corner, turning the horse loose, trying to think.

Of course, nothing could be done. I saw people and talked of justice, but they weren't impressed. 'Just one of these writing fellows, you know. No sense of pro-

portion.' I could see it in their faces and politeness was an effort.

When I returned with reports of failure to Priscilla she thanked me and tried to hide her bitter disappointment. Understanding the terrible loneliness of her heart I ranted a bit against God and His people, but presently she shamed me by her acceptance, and we talked again, quietly and calmly.

Not once in fifty-two years had she been separated from Moses, she told me simply, and her hands came tightly together with the pain of knowledge. I understood love then for what it is. They'd come together at Barnstaple Fair when she was seventeen and he twenty-three, and he'd been good to her. All through they'd respected each other. Disagreed a bit maybe sometimes, but never so much that they hadn't come together again for the next meal. God knows what they'd do to his lively soul in that place.

She asked me to write a letter, which I did, just to say she was all right and God keep him the same, and she folded the paper her own way with a silk handkerchief or two, for he'd a sensitive nose. Watching her then and afterwards I thought she would surely wither to her death, so thin and frail she seemed.

Sprenoble passed once when I was talking to her; the leaves were down and he could see us clearly as we him and his bunchy smile. But Priscilla didn't blink or lose a word. He was waiting in the lane when I crossed presently to the farm.

'Excuse me, sir, but is it wise to harbour the likes of her? Anyway, if you should happen to miss anything just let me know.'

And off he swaggered in full complacency, while I rocked with shame and confusion to think that the same life was in us both.

## POOR MAN'S MEAT

A month went by and through a friend, a lawyer, I gained word of Moses. He was quiet, taking punishment well; that was the way they put it. 'Taking punishment well!' My God! I found other words for Priscilla, and she was comforted and said she wanted something to pass the time, the days seemed so long; a bit of gardening, maybe, if I'd lend her tools, some washing to do, or mending, anything. So I gave her a light sort of spade and a boiler to be boiling water, some wool, too, to be knitting warmth for Moses, although she didn't use it that way. She turned it into stockings and scarves for me, book covers and a shawl for my mother, and I couldn't say no since it pleased her to do it, kept her mind afloat.

I gave her a spaniel pup for company, a neat liver and white bitch, but she'd too much sense to be wasting patience on it. I remember, too, she asked for a big-lettered calendar and how difficult it was to get one so late in the year; but I managed to find one, and when she had it she tore off a leaf morning by morning and burnt it, spitting always on the curling ash as if to drive it deeper into the past. The horse grew fat with grass and corn and the bruised fruit thrown from the apple shed, but Priscilla remained like a bud touched by frost, withered but painfully alive, counting the days before Moses would be freed.

'And then?' I would ask.

'Then I think we'll go a long way,' she said: 'just to forget this standing still.'

'And never return?'

'I don't know. Maybe not, for there's a hurt in this place for us.'

'Nothing else?'

'Kindness, too, which we shall not forget. Does a dog ever forget where the whip hangs? Trouble,

## POOR MAN'S MEAT

trouble, trouble! Isn't that always the poor man's meat? But Moses says there's always an echo waiting for those that stir it.'

Generously she said that she would gladly mend my weak eyes, give me diamond sight, if only I would give her an unbroken month of my time. But like the fool I was I hadn't time to spare, being busy on a long-winded, moral tale which nobody wants. To-morrow, I thought, and then Moses came back days before he was expected, and my chance was gone. Good conduct had earned a remission.

I had been munching celery as I worked, and then he appeared at my door, smiling soberly, Priscilla at his side. His clothes were oddly creased and smelt strangely and his hands and face had become less brown. But he was whole. Prison hadn't even scarred him.

I offered tobacco and found a bottle, but characteristically he preferred celery, and there we sat, all three, even Priscilla nibbling at a crisp-bladed heart he found for her, not having much to say, but all three glad with a different gladness. I think I regretted my absence at petty sessions, my failure to help, and he touched me kindly and said, 'No matter'. I didn't speak of Sprenoble, of injustice.

On into the dusk we sat, and Moses thought they would stay two days more if I would have them, and I was sorry it was to be no longer, but already there was a smell of spring in the air, an earthly sweetness full of the promise of blossom, and I could see that they wanted to go where not even a memory could disturb their joy in it.

Most of those two days Moses spent at his forge filling a neat oak box with nails as a gift to me. On the afternoon of the second day he went away and

returned with a splendid young apple tree which he planted exactly on the spot where the caravan had stood. 'Just for remembrance,' he explained. He gave me the nails and hoped there would be enough for my wants. They were of all sizes, very satisfying in their shapeliness, and some even, of the largest, had my initial on the head. I thanked him as well as I could, and he took my hand in his two and looked at it as if reading it, shaking it well before turning to lead the waiting horse into the lane. Priscilla came behind him with a hasty kiss upon my cheek, and ran, yes, ran after Moses as if afraid that she might lose him again.

Very lonely the orchard seemed when they had gone. I never saw them again. For a long time I lost faith in my theory of natural justice, in the compensating swing of circumstance, but there came a day when faith was abundantly renewed. Because of his efficiency Sprengle was promoted to a New Forest serjeantry where, in the process of impounding an ass strayed from a gipsy encampment, he was kicked in the face and his jaw broken and his tongue split so that for ever after his speech was a brutish, unimportant gibber.



## FINE CIDER

It's a particularly fine cider press and mill too. The press is of oak with a massive steel screw, and weighs half a ton. It cost two pounds; I should have got it for ten shillings but for some fool of a woman who wanted it for an ornamental rose-arch in her precious garden. I bought a dozen barrels too, good, country-coopered stuff with staves an inch and a half thick and heavy galvanized bands, quite the best barrels I've ever seen.

Old Sugar Blaney, the cattle haulier, who brought the load home for me, thought the press was a bargain. It took six of us and two gallons of cider to unload it. He wasn't at all sure about the barrels though. When I asked why, he grinned widely and pulled at his stringy, sandy moustache, his tight little eyes blinking fast:

'Didn't ye ever hear tell about 'Pendent Paston and the trick he played? Well, I'll be boxed!'

He tipped his rusty bowler hat back a bit and gazed thoughtfully down into his empty mug. I refilled the mug quickly.

'Why ever was he called 'Pendent?'

Sugar told his men to pile into the lorry and wait for him at the gate, settling back comfortably, his short, thick legs spread and both hands round his mug.

'They'll drink you dry, otherwise,' he said: 'Pendent? Ah, yes, that was just short for independent. He was made that way twice over. He was a game-keeper like his father and grandfather before him. A rare good one too. He knew the Manor woods like you'd know the grain in that table and as for birds and things he knew 'em inside out. I saw him marching

## FINE CIDER

once with an armful of fox cubs and the vixen trotting behind tame as milk; they were camped a bit too near his pheasant coops and he was moving 'em to another lodging. I've heard chaps say he would talk a hare into his pocket for a bet and then let it go again as if he loved it.

'He used to have pretty much his own way with the old Squire, but when the old man died and a maiden sister came along to take over it was a different bunch of keys. Right off this sister told 'Pendent not to be killing any more vermin or anything else. Everything had a right to live and she liked to see hawks and owls and stoats about the place. 'Pendent couldn't believe she meant it and he just went on his own sweet way, shooting and keeping like he'd always done.

'That settled it. Dame Alice was a stout-minded old girl and she told him blunt as he wouldn't obey orders he'd have to go. She didn't understand that keeping was in his blood and he couldn't stand by and let the bad run with the good. She gave him a week's notice and orders to get on with the cider-making to fill in his time for the last few days.

' 'Pendent was mad as a Spanish bull. He'd half a mind to tell her to suck her thumbs, but he didn't. He had a bit of an idea to sting her a bit and he tore into that cider-making like a windmill in a gale. My boy Saul helped him, that's how I come to know. They'd an engine to run the mill and they pulped and pressed ten ton of apples quick as boiling kettles. Some said he lost twenty pounds weight of sweat that week and I reckon it's true.

'He wasn't a man to be bossed by anyone, let alone a woman. He'd a knack of getting nasty when someone trod on him and right then he had a tidy old trick up his sleeve, something she'd remember him by in a

## FINE CIDER

back-handed way as he thought. He wouldn't let Saul fill the barrels more than three parts full and on his last night he went through the woods, shooting right and left, fur and feather, anything he could see, pheasants, rabbits, a wild cat or two, a fox and a couple of badgers he wouldn't have thought of shooting ordinary like. It must have sounded like half a war. Back he goes to the cider shed with sack after sack of dead meat and sets to and chops it all up small, just as it is, and stuffs the muck into the barrels, filling 'em up.

'Then he cleared off home, free and easy, thinking he'd taught her ladyship a lesson. There wasn't another keeping job of his class going hereabouts and he idled about, meaning to wait till they tapped the cider to have his laugh out before moving on. But he wasn't built for idling. It got on his nerves having nothing much to do and after nine months of it he'd begun to wish he hadn't waited.

'Then one day he was brought word that Dame Alice wanted to see him and it rattled him good and proper. He thought she'd found out and meant to plaster him. He didn't fancy being nipped and he grabbed his gun and set out to blow those barrels to hell, destroy the evidence, ye might say.

'When he got there though he couldn't help being a bit curious. There was no one about and he thought he might as well know just how bad the cider was before letting rip. He tried one barrel that had been tapped and was mighty surprised to find the cider clear and good. He tried another barrel and that was better still and he went all down the line, sampling and not understanding it at all. He might have known the cider would *taste* all right even if there was plenty of ugly mischief in it.

'After an hour or so 'Pendent was middling happy.

## FINE CIDER

and he didn't jump or cuss when Dame Alice walked into the shed. She didn't seem surprised to see him either, only said it was about the cider she'd sent for to see him. It was the best she'd ever drunk and was doing her digestion no end of good and if he could see his way clear to enter her service again she'd be very pleased.

'Pendent was pretty pleased with everything himself by then and he began drawing off a drop here and there for the Dame to be tasting. It was all good and strong and no sense trying to pick out the best. They had a fair good go at it though, sampling, and in the end Dame Alice was as free and top-heavy as 'Pendent. It must have been right funny.

'Pendent had to help her along back to the house. That wasn't specially easy because she was a big, hearty woman. Crossing the yard she slipped and cracked some bones, her skull too. 'Pendent was in a hell of a way about it, blaming himself. The Dame was in a pretty bad way too from what I heard. It was four months before she was up and about again and 'Pendent kept her going through the worst, shooting game right and left to make nourishing broth for her. He'd got to know her quite well in that shed and was trying to make up for bad feeling. He had a great belief in pheasant jelly and stuff like that, and it certainly helped the Dame a lot. He shot the vermin too because he couldn't stand the sight of rubbish about the place, but I don't think the old girl minded any more.

'The game on the estate had run down badly when keepering stopped and 'Pendent got to going farther afield for what he wanted. He was pinched one night miles away with a bunch of pheasants on him. They charged him with poaching and he got it hot and strong, three months without the option. Very bad

## FINE CIDER

case, gamekeeper turned poacher, should have known better, terrible bad example and all that stuff; you know how a country bench squints at those kind of jobs.

'Dame Alice was in a terrible way when she heard about it all after a month or two when she was about again. She worked fast too, got him out in no time at all and married him right away. I reckon no one had ever done anything quite like that before for her and she couldn't miss it.

'They came home and settled down all comfortable, punishing the cider good and proper, 'Pendent specially after his dry time in jail. Well, it got him in the end and no wonder with all that muck and poison in the barrels. He should've known better. He was dead overnight ye might say and it broke the old girl's heart. That's why she's sold out and gone away. That's why I don't recommend those barrels not one bit.'

He drank and sighed heavily, looking past me at distant things.

I certainly didn't fancy the barrels much myself by then. I wasn't even curious enough to cut one open just to see what remained. I gave them to Sugar to get rid of as best he could. The press was worth the money, anyway, I consoled myself.

I didn't ask Sugar what he meant to do with them. I wish I had just to see how fast his mind could work. Loudly he recalled men and lorry and the barrels were reloaded and more cider drunk. Singing happily, all except Sugar, the crew departed, the lorry racing thunderously through the orchard, the barrels rolling and bumping.

Sugar did pretty well out of them too as I heard later. He sold them for a pound apiece to someone who'd missed them at the sale.

## FINE CIDER

Even then I wasn't suspicious. I did ask Saul, months afterwards, as a matter of practical interest, just how long it took 'Pendent to stuff all that flesh and bone into the barrels and he stared, frankly puzzled.

'But didn't he?'

'Not that I know of. . . .'

It was then, a bit late, I admit, that I remembered Sugar's reputation for story-telling and pub-craft. Too late I detected flaws in the story, flaws in my own character for believing so easily. But I had my revenge though, for when Sugar sent apples and barrels for cider to be made in my own press I put a dozen rats into each barrel for him, just to teach him a lesson, the only kind of lesson he'll swallow. I won't say I hope he chokes, only that he has an unpleasant pang or two. And, anyway, it was his idea, so he can't grumble.









AIDE-de-CAMP'S LIBRARY

---

Accn. No.....997

1. Books may be retained for a period not exceeding fifteen days.